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BEARING IT, HALF EXTENDED BEFORE HER, SHE RETURNED TO THE DETECTIVE, SAYING:
"LOOK AT THIS," AND THE DISGUISED MAGIC BEHELD A HUMAN SKULL.

CHAPTER I.

A NOVEL EXPRESS PACKAGE.

NIGHT, starry and moonless, over the undulating and timber-dotted country bordering the track of the B. & O. R. R., between the cities of Baltimore and Washington.

At a little station not many miles beyond the Relay, a somewhat unusual incident had transpired.

The accommodation train regularly passing the station at about seven o'clock had put off a large pine box.

"A blunder," the express agent had remarked to the ticket man. "This box was meant for Frederick. You can get it on the north-bound train that passes here at eight five, and it will be forwarded from the Relay. There won't be much delay, after all—"

And then the gong sounded, the bell tolled, and the train went puffing on its way, leaving the box on the low platform.

A rather heavy looking box, and as it had to be transferred to the opposite platform for the return train, the ticket agent turned to a party standing near, saying:

"Give me a lift, will you, please? I'm afraid I can't manage the thing alone."

The Head Hunter.

The two had to exert themselves considerably to get the "thing" across the tracks.

And by the light of the agent's lantern, they saw on the lid a warning to "handle with care—this side up!"

But for its square ends, it might have been taken to be the outer casing of a coffin in transit; the length and breadth and depth were about the dimensions of a coffin.

While the agent retired to his office, the countryman, with an attitude of curiosity, lingered around the box, first at one end and then at the other, scanning the inscription on the top anion and striving to conjecture what could be the mysterious contents.

Nearly an hour must elapse before the north-bound train would come along; it was the usual time when the agent hurried off to his dwelling for supper.

A few minutes later and he was making away along the track in the direction of his home, his lantern swinging by his side.

The countryman lingered still longer by the box, when, after evidently concluding that it would be an impossibility to tell of its contents by looking at the outside, he too withdrew from the platform to the store, the lights from which glimmered through the half-frosty and bluey dun of this late September night.

It was an hour when all was wrapt in a tomby quiet at the station; when only the soon-to-be passing 6:30 through train from Washington would come bowling along—and then another interval of half an hour, when the station would be thrown open again for the Accommodation.

The minutes passed.

Alone and mysterious stood the box against the side of the small frame building.

Then the mystery increased, for, though the fact would have been scarcely discernible in the gloom of the night and the additional shadow of the building, there was a movement within the box, and the lid slightly raised at one end.

Another lapse of minutes; another movement; and again and more raised the lid; then noiselessly the whole lid was removed and a man stepped cautiously out upon the platform.

Without betraying his presence by a sound, he hurried across to the siding—a distance of but a few steps—where the huge broken nuggets of iron ore were piled in waiting for transportation on the morrow.

Several times he made the trip across, each time returning with a heavy piece of the ore in his arms.

These pieces he deposited in the box from which he had emerged, until he thought he had about restored the weight of which it had been deprived by his coming from it.

Then, at one adroit push, he fitted and shut down the lid, which closed with a sharp click, showing that the fastenings were on the inner side, and the screw-heads visible were but shams on the outer side.

A moment later and he had whisked out of sight into the road and beside the clump of trees at the back of the station, where he coolly climbed up onto the rail of the fence and waited.

He retained his post until the agent returned.

He saw the box placed upon the train when it came up.

Then, when silence again drew down upon the surroundings, he slowly made his way down the grade of the road toward the stream known as Deep Run.

"So far, so good. I am here. Now for business!"

Deep Run, so called, is in reality but a shallow stream of dusky pebbling in its normal state. But when the hills and adjacent ravines pour out their roaring bilge in the hours of storm, this stream becomes a raging torrent that sweeps far in and high upon the farm lands, forming an almost impassable barrier between the counties of Howard and Ann Arundel.

A long drought had prevailed throughout the month; Deep Run was now but an insignificant little ripple of water between the two shores, through which it was possible to wade with scarcely more inconvenience than the wetting of the gaiter tops.

At the foot of the road being followed by the mysterious individual who came out of the box, the road became two roads in a sort of fork.

The man turned toward the lower fork, where a huge log, with one side adzed off, and chained to trees on either shore, formed a somewhat precarious bridgeway.

He mounted the unsteady bridge log.

Beyond was an almost impenetrable blackness, where the trees domed and shrouded the pathway out to the road.

An uninviting labyrinth.

But the man kept on, as if he knew well every step he took.

When near the opposite side, however, he was strangely halted.

A voice came from the blackness.

"Hold! Go no further, if you value your life!"

A woman's voice!

It was almost sternly grave, rather than peremptory.

Its accent was musical, notwithstanding the

inflection of deep gravity, and the man knew that it must belong to a young person, though he could not discern the speaker.

He obeyed the command, saying:

"Hello! a highwayman—or highwaywoman."

"No, you are wrong," rejoined the voice of the unseen. "It is neither. But I am one who would save your life, if you will listen to reason."

And she added, as the man remained silent:

"Will you hear me, and turn back while you have yet time?"

"Why should I turn back? What wrong am I doing in crossing this bridge, I would like to know?"

"You do not understand—or you won't. I do not allude to your merely crossing this bridge. Any one has a right to do that. But beware how you continue on your mission here."

"Ah, I am on a mission, eh?"

"Why do you trifle, when you must realize that I am giving you a timely warning?"

"You mean to fire upon me from that ambush, I suppose, and then make away with my valuables?"

"No, I do not. Why should I be warning you to turn back, if I meant to do that?"

"What do you mean, then?"

"Will not this fact of my telling you that your life is in great danger show you that I know you?—show you that you must be walking into a trap?"

"You've got the best of me. Who do you take me to be?"

"Who you are, I know not. But I know what you are."

"Well, what am I?"

"A detective."

There was a lapse of silence.

The man was knitting his brows a little vexedly there in the dense gloom. The hidden woman had spoken the truth; he was a detective—one of the most famous and daring of all the Shadow Brigade in the Monumental City—no less a personage than Mark Magic, the bold and indefatigable sleuth.

Magic was on a new and strange trail now.

About a week previous to this night, a message had been sent into the city to the police marshal, requesting the services of a detective in a peculiar case which had been developed quite by accident in one of the ore-banks of Ann Arundel not far from the station at which our narrative opened.

In cutting out the chambers of an old mine that was about to be re-worked, the miners had come across a hollow in the huge bank, in one of the deserted chambers, where was imprisoned the body of a murdered man.

The cavity had been traced upward, revealing that the man, evidently murdered, had been lowered into the pit and the earth heaped in after him, it being held above his body by the chance joisting tilted against the inside of the chamber.

The body was not yet so far decomposed as to prevent complete recognition of his identity.

There was then pending an application for the payment of a benefit in the Accident Insurance Company, the demand being from the attorney of two brothers of three for the insurance of the life of the third.

The man found entombed in the pit was the third brother.

The names of the three brothers were George, James and Richard Pullett.

The murdered man was Dick Pullett.

His skull was found to have been crushed in with the edge of a mattock.

That he had been made away with by some foul means, was the common talk of the miners' camp in the hills; but as the body could not be found, the insurance company would not, of course, pay the benefit.

The store-keeper—like all country storekeepers in mining districts—had a long account against the deceased for goods obtained prior to his disappearance.

He, with the brothers, was not unreasonably anxious to have a settlement from the company, as he knew that the two surviving brothers would promptly pay their relative's indebtedness out of the money when received.

The mystery of the case had so far aroused the company, now that the body had been found, that they telegraphed forthwith, while yet at the spot in the country where the startling exhumation had been made, for a detective.

That personage replied to the telegram promptly.

He obtained all the information he could while at the camp where lived the Pullett brothers; and among the items of his information was the not to be disregarded rumor current with some who however confined their murmurs to whispers, that the Pullett brothers probably knew more of the killing of their brother than they dared reveal.

The Pulletts found themselves being shadowed by the detective to a certain extent, and when convinced that they were objects of suspicion, they had boldly cornered the sleuth and informed him, with considerable menace, that if he did not make himself scarce, he would probably be tossed into a pit the same as had been Dick Pullett.

A rough element seemed to be at the back of the Pulletts, and the officer, realizing that he could hardly accomplish much, now that his person and suspicions were so well known, returned to the city, to inform his employers and his chief that some other man had better take the job.

The "other man" was promptly given the case, with the few memoranda made by the first officer.

The man was Mark Magic.

He was trailing after the unknown murderer of Dick Pullett.

CHAPTER II.

A TRAMP IN TOW.

THE effort to hunt down the murderer of Richard Pullett, Magic realized, must be made in a systematic manner; he must get into the camp with his identity unknown.

The contrivance of the express-box miscarried had been his own; the agent on the train did not himself know but what the occurrence was a blunder from the main office; but, by some extraordinary means, it had become known that he was to arrive and had now arrived.

Here was a person at the very outset of his operations, warning him that he and his mission there was no secret.

At the peril of his life, he was being warned to retreat.

Magic was not the sort of a man to retreat.

"Why don't you come out of those trees and let me have a look at you?" he asked, without apparently noticing the last remark of the hidden female.

"It isn't worth while to show myself to you; you wouldn't know me if I did. It matters not who I am. I am only here to give you fair warning. Will you heed it? Or are you one of those men who don't know when they are well off, and mean to go ahead in spite of the advice of one who would be a friend?"

Magic affected to laugh.

"Well!" he exclaimed. "This is rather a singular racket, anyhow. You have said that I am a detective. What made you say that, now?"

"Because I know it."

"What is your reason for supposing that I am?"

"They are looking for a detective back here every day."

"That is no reason."

"And they know that he wouldn't dare to come openly."

"Why not?"

There was a moment's hesitation.

Then the female answered:

"If the Pulletts knew that another detective was here, they wouldn't stop to warn him this time."

"What would they do?"

"Kill him."

"The Pulletts are a pretty bad set, then? But I haven't the honor of their acquaintance—"

"You'll know them soon enough if you don't listen to me and turn back while you have time."

"See here,"—and there was something of a snap to the musical voice—"you were in that box on the station platform. I saw you filling it up with iron ore as I was coming across the track from the store. You didn't see me, and when I saw what you were up to I kept quiet, while I walked on. Now, I guess you know that I know what I am talking about. I want you to turn back and keep out of this business."

"I would give a quarter to see that woman's face," thought the detective, in a whisper. "She must have some object in keeping me off the track of the Pulletts."

He asked:

"Will you let me see you?"

"No."

"Don't be too sure!"

It has been shown in some of the former adventures of our detective that he was somewhat of an athlete.

As he uttered the words "don't be too sure," he took a tremendous leap forward.

The effort carried him clear of the bridge log and partly into the depths of the stygian gloom amid the trees.

As he went, he half-reached forward as if to grasp the party with whom he had been holding the singular dialogue.

Into the bushes he went.

Then he clutched hither and thither, while his keen eyes strained rapidly on every side.

But he was disappointed.

Not a trace was there of the hidden female.

Nor could he detect the slightest sound to indicate the retreat of any one from the spot.

Then while he stood still, baffled and listening, a voice came to him from a considerable distance to one side:

"You have had fair warning! I would have saved your life! You are now doomed, if you persist in following your course!"

It was the same voice; and it struck Magic that she could hardly be one of the family of a miner, for her language was far above that commonly heard among the daughters and wives of the toilers in the banks.

The Head Hunter.

At this juncture, there arose on the night a sound of voices in the direction of the other side of the bridge; several miners, returning from a brief spree at the grocery, were about to come across.

From the depths of the darkness surrounding him, Magic could dimly discern their forms on the opposite bank—some of them progressing rather unsteadily, for, though the country had long been under the rule of the prohibition law, there are places where the initiated may still get their questionable comfort of alcoholic stimulant to almost any extent of quantity.

Partly drunk were they, and the air was filled with maudlin talk and tipsy song.

As the miners came stumbling along after crossing the bridge, one of the foremost tripped upon something that was lying squarely in the middle of the path.

"Cuss it!" he shouted, as he went sprawling headlong into the sand. "W'ot or'ney cuss lef' that log a-lyin' right across the way? Look out there, you fellers, or you'll be gittin' a broken nose in a minute—"

"Tain't no log," said one, who stooped to see what it was there looking like a log of wood; and he added, as the others came up:

"Some feller drunk."

"Who is it?"

"Durn if I know. Got a match?"

A match was struck after some fumbling and difficulty.

They bent to examine the man lying in the path.

The object of their scrutiny was a veritable specimen of the tramp miner—one of those who move about from mine to mine, never remaining long with one employe, and probably kicked out of a job as often as they throw it up themselves.

His clothes were in tatters, though it might have been observed that what they had lost by constant wear was made up by quantity. He was literally enveloped in rags.

A battered slouch hat was drawn askew over a discolored face.

"Say, w'ot air you doin' here, old man?" demanded one of the crowd, stooping over the stranger.

"Huntin' fer work," was the slow response, given with several hiccoughs and a final, long-drawn grunt.

"Looks like he'd been gittin' some work in already," remarked one of the more sober.

"Where'r you stoppin' at?"

Another drunken grunt was the only response to this.

"H'ist him up, an' let's take him along. He'll be all right in the mornin', an' maybe the boss'll give him a chance."

The suggestion was acted upon.

A species of sympathy pervades the breasts of the better class of miners in the ore-banks, for one of their number who may be out of employment, whether by his own act or whether discharged by some of the over-exacting bosses.

The stranger was assisted to his feet, with several lurches both on his own part and those who gripped him.

"Give 'im a drink," suggested one.

The bottle was produced.

The tramp miner, with unsteady hand, received it and raised it to his lips.

But his nerves seemed to be remarkably shaken up, for ere the bottle reached his ready mouth, the liquor began to pour over his ragged front and down his sleeves.

Whereupon one, seeing the waste, grabbed the bottle half angrily, crying:

"Look a-yere! That air stuff ain't so plenty 'round yere to be spilt that-a-way, durn it!"

They assisted the man to take a drink of the vile stuff.

Then the whole party, with the "pick-up" between them, resumed the tedious march along the road toward the hills.

Dangerous the roads there.

Close to the edges, in many instances, come the abyssing lines of the great excavations.

A reckless step too far to one side would hurl the imperiled human down, far down, into the broad bottoms of the mines that honeycombed the hills in every direction.

Over the hills and through the miniature valleys created by the off-cast, went the tipsy crowd.

At last they came to a gentle slope hemmed in by the towering side of the hill where they were, a majority of them, employed.

On the slope were the mud huts of the miners.

A sort of village, laid out with tolerable evenness; the huts composed of saplings cut to fit in one bunch at the top, with a circle at the bottom—like an inverted cornucopia—and the exterior thickly plastered with mud.

Through a hole in the tops of nearly all of these there slowly issued a thin, serpentine line of smoke, for the chilly nights were coming on and a fire within the primitive abodes was not uncomfortable.

In some of the huts the glimmer of the fires shone forth. The roistering crew distributed themselves variously among the huts; the two who supported the strange comer took him into their own abiding-place, one remarking:

"You can bunk here to-night, old man; an' if

you're all right in the mornin', I reckon you kin git some work in our mine."

But the tramp, without seeming to understand this friendly speech, threw himself unceremoniously onto a pile of straw at one side, and with a final long-drawn grunt of satisfaction, rolled over and went to sleep.

Little ceremony prevails among the rough denizens of these mining-camps. One paused only long enough to stretch a ragged blanket before the angle of the opening at the entrance, then the two themselves sought other piles of straw that were ready in the rounded corners of the space.

The night went by. Almost before the light in the east had changed from gray to crimson, and ere the sun had showed the tip of its disk above the horizon, the camp-fires were aglow and the smell of bacon wafted up from the roughly-romantic slope.

The great horn, like the blowing signal of a fog-horn on a canal-boat, sounded from a far-off hill, blown from the lungs of a stalwart and weird-looking negro.

Over the hills for miles went the hoarse notes. With this early light of dawn another of the toilsome days was at hand; the miners trooped, like specters, forth from their quarters of scant cheer to wield the mattock and the shovel.

"You kin stay here fer to-day, friend," said one, to the tramp, who would have gone with the rest to seek the work he professed to be wanting. "You jest work off that there rummy tremble out o' your nerves. We'll see the boss, an' I don't doubt'at you'll be put on the gang by to-morrer. You kin do the cookin', too. An' mind you, don't you keep us a-waiting when we come home fer the grub at noon, or we ain't a-going to do nothin' fer you."

"That there's all right," returned the stranger. "I ain't traveled through all the mines in the county fer nothin', I ain't. You bet I'll have the Western turkey a-bilin' hot when you come in, I will," and seemingly well satisfied with the arrangement, he went about clearing up and cleaning the few utensils that had been used for breakfasting purposes.

Generally in the gangs of miners, there is appointed one who does a three-quarter day's work, returning in time to prepare the noonday meal for the others. For this service, he is given his own food and shelter for nothing.

In a short time after the blowing of the horn, the tramp was left entirely alone in the hut; and only an old and feeble negro woman in a hut at the further side of the camp remained besides himself in the surroundings.

He was about to step forth, when suddenly into the space of the opening came the form of a young and beautiful woman.

She stood perfectly still for some moments, gazing hard at the new miner.

"Who are you?" she demanded, presently, and in the tone of one who had an entire right to put such a question.

CHAPTER III.

A MYSTERIOUS SKULL.

THE ragged tramp rubbed his eyes and looked, then rubbed them again and looked, without replying.

Then he exclaimed:

"Wal, durned if I ain't asleep an' dreamin', I reckon. Good-mornin', miss, if I'm awake, an' I'm a-seein' you fer true. Me? Oh! I ain't nobody at all, I ain't. On'y my name's Sammy Snag—at yer service, miss," and he doffed his tattered hat, displaying a mass of red hair that looked as if it had not been scissored for many a month.

A look of keen intelligence came into the eyes of the girl.

She drew herself up a little more until she appeared positively like some young empress roaming there amid the rough, half-wild life around her.

She was of excellent height. Her face was of an exquisite oval, her features being remarkably lovely, notwithstanding the color of cheek and brow were somewhat tanned. Her attire was of a steely homespun material, short in skirt and sleeve, revealing high gaiters incasing a shapely foot and ankle, and bare arms, round and plump, brown from exposure and endowed with a muscle that seemed wonderful in one of her sex and age.

About her red lips there was a firm compression that showed great determination of character, while not destroying the symmetrical outline of nature. Her bosom, beneath the neatly-fitting jacket, was full and strong.

On her head she wore a loose, round cap that matched her garb in color, and from beneath the rim of which fell a length of hair, confined in one massive plait that reached below her waist, its end terminating in a ribbon that was also gray.

As she eyed the new-comer in the camp, and as he spoke, her large blue orbs shot a glance upon him that was peculiar.

She cast a hasty look around the outside of the hut, and then again fastening her gaze upon Sammy Snag, said:

"No need to tell me who you are, for I know you."

"Thankee, miss," with a jerky bow. "Reckon I'm a-feelin' mighty proud to be known by a purty gal like you air, though I ain't a-known' you. Who might you be?"

"I am Frank May, the belle of the mines, since Lucy married and went away," she declared, with a slight degree of pride.

"Sho, now!"

"And you—"

"Oh! I'm Sammy Snag, that's all," he interrupted.

"Is that your real name?"

"Why, I didn't never have any other, miss." And he added, making another of his awkwardly polite scrapes:

"Won't you come inside an' sit down fer a chat? If you're the belle o' these here mines, I reckon I'd like to know you better'n I do. No harm, miss; jest walk right in. I'm the cook fer to-day, I am, an' to-morrer I'm a-goin' to work, if the boss'll give me a show—"

"Instead of going to work, you had better take yourself away from here as soon as you can," she said, without advancing so much as a step in response to his invitation.

"Why, what'll I do that fer?" he asked, staring at her in astonishment. "I'm just come down here fer to git work—"

She stopped him by a gesture, at the same time looking forth again at some object outside the hut. Then, in a lowered voice, she said:

"You want to know me better than you do, you say?"

"Wal, I shed smile!" and he did simulate an extraordinary smile that made his tramp-like features appear ridiculous.

"Then come to the log bridge this afternoon, after the men have gone back to their work. It's a quiet place, and there I may open your eyes a little, since you are such a foolhardy man."

"What am I foolhardy fer?"

"You cannot disguise yourself from me. Your voice has betrayed you. You are the same man who crossed the bridge last night and whom I warned back in my desire to save your life. Hush! Some one is here. Don't forget the appointment."

Touching her red lips with the tip of one of her fingers, warningly, she glided away from the entrance.

An instant later Sammy Snag saw an old colored woman pass, casting, as she went, a sly glance toward the hut.

Then he went out himself, and after nodding to the woman, started to roam around during the interval before the return of the miners.

He had entered a narrow path that led off up the slope and was idly walking along, using his eyes on either side as he went, when a figure darted clumsily from a bush at his very side.

It was the little old negress.

She had headed him off by coming a short cut through another path from the colony of huts.

Her bony and black hand gripped his sleeve.

"Honey!" she said, in a low strange way, and casting furtive glances off toward the surrounding foliage.

"Wal, aunty, w'ot air the matter with you?"

"You's done been torkin' to de belle o' dese yere mines, you is, does you know dat?"

"Yes, I reckon."

"Ware o' her, honey!—ware o' her!" she sibilated, still holding him by the ragged sleeve of his coat.

"W'ot air you drivin' at, aunty?"

"I's a warnin' you, I is. If you isn't keerfu' you's gwine ter he bewitched, shuah! Dat yah gal's a witch—you mine w'ot I's a-tellin' you—you hears me. Steer cl'ar o' her, else you fine out w'ot I's sayin'. Look out fo' you'self," with which singular speech, she hobbled away again into the bushes and vanished from the surprised man's gaze.

"So, there's another mystery around this camp, eh?" muttered the voice of Mark Magic, undisguised. "Who is this belle? She's a strange one to be mixed up with such a rough set. I must try to solve that while I'm working my other little game."

He returned in time to prepare the dinner for the miners who would be back at noon.

His cooking gave entire satisfaction, and he was informed that he would have an interview with the boss in the morning that promised to result in his employment.

When the afternoon had advanced toward three o'clock, he started toward the log bridge to keep the appointment with the beautiful girl who called herself the belle of the mines.

A queer adventure was here in store for him. Lovely Frank May was there ahead of him.

"You took your time in coming," she said.

"Wal, I'm cook, es I told you, miss. I had fer to clean up the things, I reckon, afore I c'u'd leave the hut—"

"Why do you persist in using that manner of language when addressing me? It may be all right for your disguise when you are among the miners from whom you wish to conceal your identity; but when you know that I know you, why do you keep it up? You might as well speak properly."

"Wal, you air a puzzler, you air," he rejoined, staring at her as if her utterance was a deep mystery to him.

The Head Hunter.

"See here," she said, in a business tone that was rather sharp; "you can't fool me. You are the detective who came over the bridge last night. I am the one who warned you back. I did it for your own good—not because I wanted to shield the murderer of Dick Pullett. Will you talk right and squarely with me, or shall I leave you to your fate? That will not be long in coming, depend, for the Pulletts have a rare scent, as you will find—"

Perhaps what occurred upon this speech was somewhat of a surprise to her.

The detective took a quick step to her side and laid one hand on her arm, while he said, intensely:

"Would you betray me to them?"

"No," was the prompt answer.

"Then I shall not be afraid of exposure," he said, stepping back again. "Now, what was it that you had to say to me in particular, beyond this useless endeavor to turn me back from the trail I have started upon?"

"You say my attempt is to be useless?"

"Decidedly, yes."

She surprised him a little by extending one of her plump hands.

"I like you. You are a brave man. I will be your friend. I wanted to try you."

"How do you mean?"

"I did not want a timid man or an inexperienced one to start upon the trail of Dick Pullett's murderer."

"Well, why, particularly?"

"Because he would be in my way."

He looked at her with an increased surprise, but said nothing. Her remark was an enigma.

"I too am looking for the assassin!" she announced, shortly.

"You are?"

"Yes. And I will find him, if I have the help of a man who, like you, is not be driven off by a menace of peril."

"What especial interest have you in the matter?"

"More than any one in the mining-camps can ever guess, unless you betray it to them after I have told you."

"Well?"

"Dick Pullett was my husband!"

"Indeed!"

"It was a secret marriage. We did not wish it known until Dick had saved enough money for us to quit this section and start some paying and legitimate business for ourselves. He was unlike the rest of the miners; he saved where others spent, even out of his scant wages. We would soon have had enough, when the cowardly assassin broke up our plans and made me a widow by killing him. Now you know why I am interested. Shall we be friends and work together?"

The detective had at first been impressed by the remarkable beauty of the girl, who was surely not more than twenty years of age; he now gazed upon her with an involuntary admiration.

He saw in her a woman—more than a girl—who was possessed of a forcible character far above the average of her sex; strong, healthy, determined, beautiful, and to be feared by the slayer of her husband.

This belle of the mines, then, was carrying on a species of detective observations herself.

She had uttered the singular warning to the detective to see whether he was a man who could be driven off by a menace.

Perhaps this was occasioned by the action of the previous officer who had been put on the case.

"Well, miss," he said, "if we can accomplish anything together, of course it would be well for us to be friends in the case. Can you give me any points that you may have gathered?"

"I think I can."

"I would be glad to hear them."

She left his side and advanced to the trunk of a tree that had been blasted considerably by lightning, and which stood far within the prickly brambles of the bushes at one side of the path.

In the trunk there was a cavity from which she drew forth something round and white.

Bearing it, half-extended before her, she returned to the detective, saying:

"Look at this," and the disguised Magic beheld a human skull!

It was well-preserved; evidently it had not been long exposed to the atmosphere by being within the tree.

The bone was polished highly and was really a fine specimen.

"What in the world are you doing with such a thing as that, Miss May?"

"Call me Frank, since we are to be friends," she said, looking suddenly up and full at him.

Turning the skull over, she placed one finger upon a certain spot of the skull, where there appeared to be a wound undoubtedly given during the lifetime of the owner.

A slit-like aperture, as if made by some sharp instrument that had been struck so hard upon the bone as to penetrate to the brain.

"A strong arm delivered that murderous blow," she said, gazing reflectively down at the orifice.

"I should say so," he admitted. "The arm

of a man who had the strength of a giant, I should assert.

Then, turning her keen blue eyes again upon him, she said, in a low way:

"It was precisely the same kind of wound that killed Dick Pullett. A knife-wound—a wound from a knife that was broad, sharp, strong and driven with a monster strength. It was not the edge of a mattock that killed Dick Pullett, as they suppose."

For a few seconds the eyes of the girl and the eyes of the disguised detective gazed in a mutual steadiness at one another.

CHAPTER IV. TIES UP HIS MAN.

MAGIC said:

"You seem to be wonderfully confident in your assertion."

"Did you view the head of the murdered man? That is, did you see the wound that was supposed to have been made with a mattock?"

"No, I did not!" and he added quickly; "but it seemed to be so certain a mattock edge caused the death that I had not thought of searching up anything on that particular point."

"I tell you the identical instrument which killed the owner of this skull which I hold in my hand also killed my husband, Dick Pullett. Not only are the wounds similar, but I know who it was that killed *this* poor soul."

"If it is possible that the same instrument did both deeds," remarked Magic, "and you know who did the first, then it will be an easy matter to secure the murderer of your husband, I guess."

But the reply of the girl showed that in this instance at least she was even shrewder than the noted sleuth himself.

"To know something is one thing," she said, slowly. "To prove it is quite another thing."

"That's a fact. But how came you to know who it was that killed the possessor of this skull?"

"The skull was given to me by Dick when he first became my lover, with other things and a trunk which he said he did not wish to trust in the mining-camp; so they were stowed at my cottage over the hill."

"Do you live alone over there?"

"Yes, since sister Lucy married and went away. I receive money from her sometimes—for her husband is a right good fellow and is making a good living for her. That helps me along. I preferred to remain here among the mines, so did Lucy, after father died, and I still prefer it. I am a sort of queen among the rough but good-hearted fellows."

"You're a strange girl."

"Not so very strange. You see, my father went under with the rest in those dark days early in the seventies. He was a miner and a strong man. He didn't sit down and cry over his reverses; but he didn't like to drag my mother down to a life for which she was not suited. She was an educated woman, I can tell you, and she gave Lucy and me more knowledge than we'd ever have learned in school. I've got used to the rough life. Nobody would offer me an insult here among these men—except—"

"Except who?" Magic asked, as she hesitated.

"Well, it might be some one of the Pullett brothers—not my Dick, mind you. For I can tell you another secret, if you'll keep it till the right time."

"Oh, go ahead," he assured her. "I won't say a word."

"The Pullett brothers are not brothers at all."

"Indeed?"

"They—George, James and Richard—came from Kansas. I've caught from some of Dick's confidences that they were put out of the State with the sheriff and a posse after them, when their names were different and their ways pretty crooked. They were the remnant of a bad crowd. They came East to reform, as they put it, and went to work in these mines where you went to-day. Dick was the only one of the three—who had agreed to call themselves the Pullett brothers—who really became a good man."

"Dick gave you that skull?"

"Yes. He said it was the only remaining evidence that would do Jim Pullett any harm, for a deed committed out in Kansas. He had kept it for a purpose. He said Jim always seemed to be jealous of him for some reason, and he feared that if he didn't have some hold on him that might send him to the gallows, he, Jim, was just mean enough to sell him out at any time in connection with some other offenses which he, Dick, had committed. As long as he had the skull, and could show it to certain authorities in Kansas as a piece of testimony against Jim, he was pretty safe."

"The theory is, then, that Jim Pullett struck the blow that made that frightful incision in the skull."

"That is my theory. Have you ever seen Jim Pullett?"

"Not yet. But I mean to."

"He is a giant in height and strength."

"I have dealt with giants before," said Magic, composedly.

"And to show you how unlikely it is that

George and Jim Pullett can be brothers, George is fully a head smaller than yourself; indeed, he is little more than a dwarf. What we must look for now, is some proof that Jim Pullett did the deed; we must work on the suspicion. So far I have failed in getting at anything definite, though I have been almost sleeplessly watching ever since the night that Dick disappeared—for I suspected then that Jim had done him some harm."

"Yes," agreed the detective, "we must look up the proofs. And I think among the most important, will be to find the instrument with which the deed was done in both cases. Have you ever seen any weapon on the person of Jim Pullett that would at all correspond with that which we think caused this incision?"

"If I had, I think it likely that I would have had Jim arrested and the weapon fitted to the wound without waiting any further developments," replied the girl, emphatically. "Wait a moment," she added, turning from him and again approaching the lightning-blasted tree.

She replaced the skull in the cavity.

"I have kept it there for several days, lately. I do not want Jim Pullett to find it, through any possible accident, in my house. He might hesitate at no means to get it away from me. I mean to keep it. And though poor Dick did not tell me what the deed was that Jim did in Kansas, and how the skull could be used against him, I have a notion that some day it may prove useful in my hands to discomfit him. Now," suddenly changing the tone of her voice to one of strict business, "what do you think you will do the first thing?"

"That I cannot say. I must have time to plan."

"It will not do for you and I to appear too intimate. It will arouse the suspicion of Jim and George Pullett. The dwarf makes up in cunning enough to match Jim's monstrous strength."

"You are right. And we must have chances for conferences in private. Suppose we meet here, on this spot, again to-morrow night?"

"That will do. I will be here. Good-by."

She wheeled abruptly and left him without saying anything more, and he stood watching her graceful form receding amid the trees toward the camp.

"A wonderful girl," broke from his lips reflectively. "I do not know that I have met another like her in all my experience."

"Ha, ha! and I don't suppose you'll see her again in much of a hurry!" piped a strange voice close by.

Magic turned swiftly.

The utterer of the words had an advantage over the detective, and the accent was such as to instantly show that an enemy was lurking near.

As he turned, Magic saw an ugly face within the edge of the bushes that bordered the narrow path—a face backed by a dwarfish body, enveloped seemingly in a mass of unkempt hair, and set with eyes of a satanic luster.

The complexion of the owner of the face was almost as dark as that of a mulatto.

One glance, one swift conjecture, told him that it was George Pullett, the smaller of the brothers.

And simultaneously something transpired that indicated the man must have acquired some experience beyond the mere galloping through Kansas on questionable raids—perhaps a prairie knowledge which, in conjunction with what then transpired, had enabled him to creep so stealthily up upon the conversing pair.

Something whirled through the air like a dirt-gray streak.

It had the appearance of a sinuous and slim serpent uncoiling itself in midair as it approached unerringly.

Then, ere Magic could fully comprehend, he found himself enveloped by a noose that tightened the instant it reached and encompassed his body, pinning his arms at his sides as he was in the act of reaching for his revolver.

"You cussed detective!" shouted the voice of George Pullett. "I've got you afore you knew ed it, durn yer!"

He drew the lasso tight with a remarkable dexterity.

Then he began to tug and run from the spot.

His intention was evident.

By running, he meant to keep the noose tight, even if the captive should decide to make toward him.

The rope was tight indeed; its confine was at a chance place just at the hips which really rendered Magic's hands useless.

He did precisely what the dwarf had anticipated.

He began running toward his captor, to loosen the pressure.

He did more.

His abilities as an athlete served him well in this instance.

To the surprise of the dwarf, who was himself a good runner, he found that he could not keep the rope tight.

Instead of remaining a captive, Magic became a pursuer.

At every leap he lessened the distance between himself and the running dwarf.

The Head Hunter.

With a frightened glance over his shoulder, Pullett saw that his plan of running the detective—whose identity he had evidently discovered by crawling up upon the man and the girl in time to catch a portion of their conversation—into the mine where his brother was working, was a failure.

Only time had he to realize it, when Magic was upon him.

One more gigantic leap, and the detective with hands now released from the trailing rope that still clung to his person, landed squarely on the shoulders of his dwarfish enemy.

Pullett whipped out a gleaming knife.

But ere the deadly weapon could find a mark, it was stricken from his gripe to the earth.

Magic's fist struck him a blow upon the temple that laid him insensible upon the dry sward.

Then the detective stood over his worsted adversary to contemplate him and decide what should be done with him.

That George Pullett had certainly heard much of his conversation with Frank May, the belle, he realized.

To leave the ruffian dwarf free was to jeopardize his life as well as his plans.

What to do with him?

Then the fertile brain of the sleuth came to his aid.

He sprung back and snatched up the rope with which he had been lassoed.

With this he securely bound Pullett hand and limb.

Raising him from the dusty sward, he bore him back toward the spot where the encounter at first transpired.

No one appeared to be in sight.

The detective's keen eyes had roamed searching around as he advanced to the jungle-like place.

Straight to the lightning-blasted tree he carried Pullett.

It was not a large tree; its trunk, besides having the shelf-like cavity that contained the skull, was split open nearly to the earth, as if by a wedge.

Into the aperture he forced the man, who was now regaining consciousness.

With the remainder of the rope he bound the man and the tree round and round simultaneously, until there was a very net encompassing him within the tree.

While holding Pullett with one strong arm and accomplishing the novel mode of captivity with the other, the man recovered his senses.

His first effort was a curse, loud and scorching.

Then he cried:

"You detective! Curse you! Let me out o' this! I'll kill you if I ever get free again—"

"But you won't get free, my friend, if you make too much fuss," was the cool response. "I'll just bore you with a bullet in a minute if you give me much trouble. I think you are a murderous rascal. And here you will stay until I have further use for you."

"I won't stay here!"

"I guess you will—"

Pullett broke in with a yell that was like the yell of some war-painted Indian, the sound probably reaching far from the spot into the adjacent hills.

This would have been repeated, but Magic, just then having completed the incircling process with the rope—which held the prisoner upright and fast within the wedge-like space in the tree—thrust his large handkerchief into his captive's mouth while that mouth was open, and with another and wonderfully adroit turn of a remnant of the rope, bound up the chin to the top of the head in a manner that completely gagged and nearly suffocated the raging dwarf.

CHAPTER V.

MARK MAGIC IN DANGER.

THE glaring orbs of the imprisoned and helpless wretch were fixed upon his captor with the fire of a boundless hate.

Magic was perfectly cool.

The excitement attending the consummation of his capture was but transient; as in many a similar instance of thrilling adventure before, now that the muscular part was past, he recovered his composure completely.

He stepped back and leisurely surveyed his work.

Pullett struggled vainly, and until the veins on his forehead of dark skin stood out like small cords.

He had been a much-to-be-feared desperado in his day; this quick and apparently easy triumph of a man whom he had supposed himself capable of running into the mine, grated on his conceit and brutal self-confidence to a degree that was maddening.

The fury he could not utter shone in his igneous eyes.

"I guess that will do," Magic said, in a speculative manner, as he saw that every turn of the rope was secure, and the knot finally made fast behind the tree-trunk. "You will have to remain there for awhile, my friend, until I can decide what else I want to do with you."

The dwarf had been forced into an upright position beneath the small and natural shelf on

which the skull was deposited; and his own frightful face beneath the grinning relic of a dead man made truly a novel and repelling picture.

"Good-day to you, George Pullett," Magic added. "I do not think you anticipated this as your first experience with the man you discovered to be a detective. I'll not let you starve, you may depend. But fast there you must stay for the present. No use to struggle"—as Pullett strained himself in his bondage until it seemed that he would burst a blood-vessel.

Magic observed that the spot was, at its location, to one side of the path, not likely to be visited by any passer-by.

The cavity in the tree was away from the side toward the path; the bushes were tolerably thick; the dwarf could not possibly make any outcry to attract attention.

He deemed it a safe place to leave his prisoner until he could find a more suitable one.

For of course he had resolved that George Pullett could not now, with safety to himself, be allowed to go free.

He must be retained a prisoner until some definite development occurred in the case he was working up.

With a final glance, Magic entered the road to the hills and soon reached the camp.

More time had passed than he had taken an account of during his interview with the belle of the mines and the adventure with the dwarf.

The sun was far down toward the west when he entered the hut where he was expected to have supper prepared for the miners when they returned from their work.

He again assumed his character as Sammy Snag to perfection, going about his task at the fire with a clumsy but satisfactory celerity that soon had the pot boiling and the bacon sputtering.

When the miners came, they found Snag sitting at the front of the hut smoking an old and greasy clay pipe.

"Wal, old man, everything ready fer us hungry cusses?" interrogated the foremost of the two who had the use of the hut exclusively to themselves.

"It air, an' don't you fergit it," was the response, as Snag arose and led the way to a pine board extended across two logs, which formed the table.

Knives and forks were soon being plied on the tin plates.

One of the men pronounced the new-comer a capital cook in his own peculiar way. And the other said:

"Durn me if I don't reckon it'd be better fer us to employ this here chap ourselves an' pay him fer to git up our grub fer us. It somehow tastes a leetle better'n wot I've been a-gittin' fer some time, an' that's a fact."

"Two'n't do, now," said the other, while Snag, himself eating with seeming gusto, glanced in silence from one to the other. "I told the boss I'd have the man over with me in the mornin'. He's got to go, now. But you air right, Jack—this yere's a good hash fer to be lathered up into a old caboose like this, eh?"

"You bet."

Night was fast stealing over the earth.

Across the pantalooning trees of the hills the shadows were settling steadily; only the high nobs with their piny clumps caught the departing twilight of the evening.

The two men and their chance acquaintance, Sammy Snag, had just finished a prolonged repast, when there seemed to be a commotion at the further end of the camp of mud huts.

A sound of murmuring voices came to their ears.

The tones were those of excited men.

"It's that 'ere Jim Pullett ag'in," said one, lowly. "Durn it! 'T seems ter me there ain't been no peace since them Pullett brothers kem into the camp some months ago. They're allus at some fight or trouble with somebody. I've tried to keep out o' their road as much as I c'u'd, but I 'spect they'll pounce onto me one o' these times about somethin'."

"Wonder what's the rumpus now?"

They arose from the task of filling their pipes and went out at the entrance to the hut, looking off toward where the disturbance seemed to center.

Magic also listened.

And something indeed had transpired to upset the quiet equilibrium of the mining-camp.

While the majority of the miners were at a sort of general mess in the center of the camp, where the old negress was accustomed to prepare the meals for a number, all had been startled by the sudden appearance of a form that came among them at a mad, wild run, uttering at the same time a yell that was full of a peculiar rage.

It was the dwarf, George Pullett.

At one side of the fire, over which the negress was ladling out coffee from a pot hanging on a hook from the tripod, sat the man, Jim Pullett, the giant, surrounded by that element among the miners who were the roughest, the loudest-mouthed, the most profane and "hardest" of the class.

As he saw George Pullett coming thus, like a bounding ball of pent-up and boiling rage, for-

ward, with glaring orbs and convulsively-clinching fists, Jim started to his feet.

"W'ot's the row?" he demanded, as his huge form towered over the squatting circle and his bleared eyes fixed on his supposed brother.

"Row?" howled forth the impish Pullett. "Air you asleep all this time that you're a-goin' to let a cursed detective slip in an' make a stoppin' place o' this yere camp. Why, he's right on top o' you this minute. An' I wish I could fasten these yere claws right inter his windpipe an' choke out his life, I do, fer wot he's done to me. He might a' kep' on cavortin' round yere as much as he pleased, to, if it hadn't been fer me—"

"Hol' on, thar," interrupted the giant. "W'ot air you a-drivin' at? W'ot is this yere that has happened? Keep cool, George. Tell us all about it."

At mention of the possible presence of a detective, the face of giant Jim Pullett had undergone a change that was like the transformation of a merely rough-looking face to a visage of a slumbering devil.

Then the dwarf poured out, amid a volley of consecutive interjections, the account of his recent experience near the log bridge.

A cart boy, taking a short cut over Deep Run, had come upon the man tied within the tree.

At first the sight he saw there had so terrified him that he started to run away.

A man bound helplessly within the split trunk, and over the head of that man a grinning skeleton head.

But curiosity had prompted him to investigate.

Returning timorously, he recognized George Pullett.

With some little remaining sense, he liberated first the mouth of the captive.

Then at the command of the infuriate man, the rope was untied, the arms and limbs in succession released, and the dwarf, without even pausing to thank his deliverer, had started on that headlong, bounding run to the camp, where he dashed into the midst of the men like an apparition of vengeful passion.

The coarse voice of Jim Pullett almost interrupted him as he was recounting this.

"Look a yere!" he cried. "We ain't a-goin' fer to have no detective a-nosin' around yere, as we told t'other one—air we?"

"No!—no!" answered a half-dozen voices.

"Foller me, then, an' if he's anywhere among these hills, I reckon we'll make it hot fer him afore the night gets much older," saying which, he picked up a piece of sapling that made a formidable club and started for the nearest of the mud huts.

Those who were followers and admirers of the giant bully were quickly on their feet and at his heels.

Into the huts, one after another they went, searching for the man whom George had discovered to be a daring detective in their midst in disguise.

Some of the excited men had grabbed up torches or brands from the large blazing fire, and the flaring flames of these lighted the searchers as they went.

"They're a-comin' this-a-way," remarked one of the two who had constituted themselves friends of the supposed tramp miner.

"Yes, an' they air a-lookin' fer somebody."

"An' they don't appear to be a-findin' him."

"Lucky fer the individual ef they don't, with that thar Jim Pullett a-leadin'. It's some devility, mind if it ain't."

The searchers came closer.

Into the huts they looked with angry eyes.

Those who followed the lead of Jim Pullett were as ready to wreak a summary deed upon any detective who would dare to venture into their midst as was the prime villain himself.

Why?—well they scarcely could have said, if they had been questioned.

But the spirit of the miners is a sympathetic tone.

Where there is a leader, it is generally the fact that whatever he decides to be the case, the rest will adhere to his opinion, no matter what the argument to the contrary.

And giant Jim Pullett had said that the presence of a detective at those mines was an insult to every man there.

Nearer they came to the hut where Magic, like the two who were on the outside of the tent, listened to every word that came from the approaching and excited crowd.

The detective went out and stood beside his friends.

Then he heard the loud, hoarse and angry voice of the giant saying, above the din of murmurings:

"If I kin on'y just catch a detective once around this yere diggin's, I reckon he won't want to come back ag'in in a hurry."

"Tar and feather 'im!" shouted one, suggestively.

"Yes, an' a heap sight wuss 'an that," rejoined Jim Pullett, in a brutally-meaning accent.

"Drown 'im in the old mine," came from another.

Nearer they came.

The Head Hunter.

Magic saw the form of the dwarf, George Pullett, among the roughs who were evidently seeking him, and he knew that by some strange chance the prisoner he had left in the tree had escaped.

Matters could not long remain without a startling climax.

Of course his disguise would not serve him now.

He cast a quick glance around to take in the chances for a precipitate retreat.

Not that he was a coward or even afraid to confront those who were looking for him in such numbers.

But he could not afford to spoil his plan of working up the murder case merely to show off his bravery.

Suddenly there arose another cry.

The light of the many torches flared toward the mud hut where Magic stood, revealing him and his two companions to the mass.

From the bristly lips of George Pullett went up a shout of jubilant discovery.

"That he is! Thar he is! Over there by the hut—don't you see him? That's the man!"

Like some great wave the crowd turned; then all came swerving toward the hut, with the giant striding almost at a run in the lead.

"Is that that the man?" Jim demanded, leveling one great arm in the direction of the still standing trio at the front of the mud plastered abode.

"Yes that's him, an' no mistake!"

"Then we'll soon make short work with him!" snarled Jim, increasing his gait, while his burning eyes were riveted upon the man in the trio indicated by his brother.

CHAPTER VI.

JIM PULLET AND HIS GANG OF ROUGHS.

The two miners before the hut followed the direction of Jim Pullett's pointing arm and hand.

They simultaneously turned and gazed at the quondam miner whom they had picked up and brought to their humble abiding-place and shared their straw with.

"Say air you a detective?" demanded one.

Magic, still cool and retaining the spirit of his character, raised his battered hat, cast a glance down at his rags and replied, in a dry way:

"Wal, ef I am, I reckon I must 'a' been cheated outen some o' my dues fer services, jedgin' by these yere togs. W'ot's your opinion? Air them men drunk? W'ot air they a-comin' roun' your shebang fer with so much howlin'? An' w'ot air they a-shoutin' about a detective, alway?"

The gang was now not more than fifty feet distant.

"You ain't no detective?"

"Nary."

"You don't know w'ot these galoots is a-makin' all the fuss about at all?"

"Not me."

The other miner had slipped into the mud hut and now came forth armed with his mattock.

"W'ot air you goin' to do?" asked his comrade.

"I ain't only a-goin' to stop this rumpus around my shanty, Jim Pullett or no Jim Pullett. I've steered cl'ar o' him fer all these months, an' now if he comes a-b'ilin' aroun' my own door, durn me if I don't chance him one, anyhow, whether you go into the game or not—that's me!"

He was a brawny fellow, not so much smaller than the giant who was now coming on, on riot bent, and he spoke like a man whose soul contained not one whit of cowardice.

"I'm with you, old pard. Durned if I'll see you fight the bully all by yourself, ef I get my own neck broke," and in a twinkling, and at a moment when the crowd was not more than fifteen feet from the hut, he slipped in also and returned with his mattock, which he gripped determinedly by the handle after spitting on his dirty palms.

Magic was by far the cooler of the three.

He affected to gaze upon his approaching enemies as if the disturbance was an incomprehensible occurrence to him.

Then when they were within ten feet of him, and as Jim Pullett half-extended his great hand to grasp the object of his brother George's wrath, the detective suddenly said:

"You fellers! Ain't you a-makin' a big fuss about yere fer somethin' at nobody kin find out?"

"Y-a-s!" supplemented the two miners, ready to deal blows with their mattocks. "W'ot the durnair air you a-comin' to a peaceable man's cabin fer in this sort o' style?"

The cool question of the suspected miner, and the determined attitude of the other two, seemed to surprise the crowd.

In that surprise they halted.

The resinous flare of the torches cast a flickering and broad halo over the scene.

"Now don't you have too much mouth!" cried the bullying voice of the giant. "I'm after that there man—see him?" pointing to the individual who looked so much like a tramp. "An' w'ot's more, I'm goin' fer to have him—you hear me—?"

"Thet thar man's a friend o' ours. An' you

keep away from here. We don't want no disturbance with you, Jim Pullett."

"An' you needn't be a-wantin' it. Fer if you do get it, you'll wish you hadn't, that's all. Git out o' the road, now, an' don't be too fresh over w'ot don't concern you!"

"But this yere fact does concern me an' my pard. This man, he is a friend o' ours. W'ot do you want him fer?"

"I don't object to enlighten yer on the p'int, since ye'r so pertick'ler. Why, he's a detective."

"Tell him he lies," here spoke the other of the pair of rough but honest miners, addressing the disguised detective.

Magic was equal to the emergency.

He shouted, straight at the towering giant:

"Say, these yere friends o' mine tells me for to tell you that you air a blazin' liar!"

And ere the last word was said, Pullett, with an oath that startled even the callous brains of his followers, made a wicked plunge forward, notwithstanding one of the miners raised his mattock on high.

"Stand off there, Jim Pullett!"

"Nary a stand! Git out o' the road, if you don't want me for to break your cussed neck!"

Another stride and he would be directly before the man who was now the object of both suspicion and wrath.

Magic had not yet made a motion to defend himself from the gang before him.

To the last moment he was determined to maintain his part.

But before the bully could gripe the tramp miner, there was a change in the aspect of the tableau.

"Hold on there, Jim Pullett!"

The figure of the girl Frank glided swiftly out from the deep shadow behind the hut and faced the ruffian.

She raised one of her bare arms in a commanding motion. Several of the crowd noticed that she wore a belt—something unusual with her—and more than that, in the belt was a revolver that shone with the dull brightness of new-coined silver.

Her blue eyes, as she faced the giant bully, were full of fire and confidence.

"W'ot air you got to do with it?" he demanded, coming to a short stop before her as she interposed her form directly between him and the tramp.

"I am the belle of the mines. I have some rights here. I don't propose to stand aside while you and your gang of roughs carry a high hand over peaceable people, and don't you forget that, Jim Pullett!"

"Why, cuss it! you don't know w'ot you air a-talkin' about."

"Oh, I reckon I do. You are trying to make trouble for this man who has come here to get work. You are down on him for some cause—"

"He's a detective!" howled some one from the outside of the mob.

"Yes, that's it," said Jim. "He's a cursed detective. An' we're goin' to show him an' all sech like him, that they can't come around these mines huntin' fer somethin' w'ot ain't yere."

"What is he huntin' for?"

Pullett did not reply immediately.

The question was a peculiar one—at least, he seemed to be weighing what reply he should make, while the others at his back were silent, as if the question interested them.

"What is he hunting for, Jim Pullett? Do you know?" And the keen eyes of the girl, in that flaring light of the torches, fixed upon him like shining stars.

"He's a detective, I say, an' we don't want no detectives around yere."

"Haven't detectives a right to go where they choose, when they are hunting for a murderer?"

"That's neither yere nor there. He's a detective. We won't have no detectives around yere, an' that settles it—"

"Oh! no it doesn't settle it."

"W'ot's the reason it don't?"

"Because, as I said, I do not intend that you shall carry a high hand over everybody in the mines, simply because you have whipped two or three men. Now, go on your way, and let honest people, who are trying to make a living, alone to themselves—"

"You git out o' the way, Frank May, or mebbe I'll fergit 'at you're a woman—d'y'e hear?"

"You can't scare me at all, Jim Pullett!" and there was a dangerous light in the blue eyes now, as she saw that the man was not to be turned aside from his intention.

And just here something happened that seemed to bring the very fury of the devil into his heart.

"Bully fer the gal!" yelled some one from the far side of the crowd.

Pullett glared around.

He could not locate the utterer.

But he saw, by the fitful flashing of the torches, that the crowd had been swollen by the hasty arrival of many who had been drawn from other camps to see what the row was about.

And these outsiders were, he well knew, friends indeed to the brave girl who now confronted him.

Frank May was a more formidable adversary in the camps than the detective whom they sought.

Scores of men there would have laid down their lives for the girl who had been christened by them their belle.

To another than Pullet the sign would have been enough.

But it seemed that he was a man who, with his passions once aroused, would not stop in the face of danger.

A sort of bull-dog or reckless courage.

He raised his coarse voice, in a loud command:

"Frank May, stand aside there, or it'll be the worse fer you. I'm a-goin' fer to hev that man!"

"Take him!"

With the two words, Frank drew the revolver from her belt, and cocking it, quietly and steadily leveled it at the ruffian's breast, adding:

"When you have walked through a bullet, Jim Pullet, you can take your man. Come on."

"Would you dare fer to shoot me?"

"Try me by taking one step! And when I have winged you—for I shall not aim to do more—I shall give you over to the police and get them to take you to Kansas, where you can explain about the knife-wound in the skull of the man you killed there—I mean the skull that you know Dick Pullet had!"

His face turned very pale.

In the light of the torches, that pallor had a greenish cast.

What more might have transpired was interrupted by a cry from one of Pullett's more devoted followers.

"Thar he goes! Thar he goes!"

Magic, seeing that the girl, full determined to defend him, was apt to do something desperate with the revolver which she held covering the burly breast of Jim, resolved to change the scene in a way to save her that violent resort.

He stepped cautiously backward until he had gained a position at the side of the tent-like hut of mud where the shadow from the torches fell.

Then, gathering himself for a race, he suddenly leaped further into the darkness and made off at a run.

One of the crowd had seen the movement.

In another second the cry was taken up.

Then the whole concourse came surging after him around the side of the hut, at some distance from the spot where Frank bravely held the giant bully under her revolver.

It became at once an exciting race.

Those in pursuit were determined to catch the man they now had better cause than ever to deem a detective in their midst.

Magic, on the other hand, was resolved that he would not be quietly submitted to any such operations as the many suggested by the passionate throng hied on by Pullett.

He ran toward the adjacent hill.

At its side, he knew, there was a path leading down to the "floor" of one of the mines.

His hasty survey of his surroundings during the day was now serving him.

But the miners knew that as well as he.

On they came, and their progress was faster, for there were several who tramped that very path every day, week in and week out, seeking their daily spot of toil.

Down he went, slipping and running by turns.

Presently he reached the floor.

Part of this floor was submerged by water.

It was the deserted mine that had been alluded to by the man who had suggested that the detective, if caught, should be drowned in the old mine.

At one side still remained the old cartway.

Toward this he ran—

And suddenly his progress was checked by the high wall of the embankment which he knew extended upward for nearly seventy-five feet.

His pursuers were coming on behind him.

He could not now turn back.

And the shouts that came to his ears told him that they believed him cornered, for some were going to the opposite side of the vast excavation with their torches, to head him off if he undertook to swim across.

As they drew closer, the light of the torches rayed ahead of him against the face of the impeding embankment, while it did not reveal him, as he crouched low behind a pile of clinker ore that had remained there throughout several winters.

CHAPTER VII.

WALKING A PATH OF PERIL.

For an instant, perhaps, Magic thought that he must assuredly use his revolver to protect himself from the violent-mouthed pursuers, whose shouts now contained even a more fierce tenor of rage and threat against the man suspected of being a detective.

Many who were not the immediate followers of the giant fell into the angry current of feeling that prevailed and were among the foremost in the pursuit.

But at that critical juncture, the detective made a discovery which gave just the slightest suggestion of a possibility of retreating still fur-

ther, without coming to actual combat with his enemies.

It might have been that some idle cart-boy, after or before the hours of toil, had amused himself at that spot, with an attempt to ascend the face of the precipitous embankment.

His efforts had resulted in the formation of an indented footway—a depression in the half-hard earth—of not more than a shoe-sole's width.

At a gradual angle it extended along the earthy barrier, inclining upward for some distance and then returning at another slight angle of ascent.

By leaning close in against the face of the wall and treading with great caution, it seemed possible to effect an ascent of the formidable height.

No time was to be lost in calculating the chances, if bloodshed was to be avoided.

Quickly he started out upon the hazardous way that appeared to be scarcely more than an invisible foothold against a surface of smoothness.

For twenty feet he continued in this way, at the end of which he had gained a height from the floor of the flooded mine of about fifteen feet.

Then the precarious foothold took a reverse and brought him back in the direction of the starting-point.

Another fifteen feet of height was gained by the time he stood over his former position.

He could not even hope that this dangerous mode of escape would continue to the very top of the enormous embankment; at every step he felt that soon he must be brought to a halt and from his dizzy hold perhaps be shot by those below.

The pursuers had now reached the spot where they knew that it would be impossible for the hunted man to proceed further.

A silence fell upon them.

Evidently they were an immensely astonished set when they discovered—nothing!

Their prey had vanished.

The torches flared around on every side; from the opposite shore of the miniature lake came inquiring halloos from the other division of the party.

Jim Pullett was in a terrible rage.

The air was filled with his profanity.

The dwarf, his brother, too, made more loud the utterances of chagrin and fury by his own contribution of oaths.

"But how in durnation c'u'd he git out o' yere?" demanded Jim, glaring around him as if he expected some one to answer the conundrum at once.

Then suddenly came a cry from George Pullett—a cry of exultation and savagery.

"There! Look there!"

He danced about and pointed far up the face of the precipitous wall, and the gaze of all followed his direction.

At first the others could not discern what his sharp eyes had caught by a chance glance.

Then, as they looked steadily, and while Pullett continued his demonish dance, they saw a shape that appeared to be that of a man moving slowly along the side or the face of the abyss, as if endowed with aerial powers of locomotion.

Magic had started out upon the third of the series of inclines, hugging the earth tenaciously as he could with his hands.

He was beginning to hope that he should be able to reach the top of the height.

At the moment George Pullett detected him he was nearing the end of this last slowly-ascending incline, which seemed, as if its maker had measured it almost with the accuracy of a rule, to be giving him another rise of fifteen feet at the terminus of every twenty.

"Thar he is!"

"Hi! Shoot the cuss!"

"That's him!"

"Yes, fetch 'im down with a bullet!"

The cries mingled and rose to the ears of the imperiled detective like a wave of hate and omen.

He realized that they might easily shoot him from below, and with set teeth he pushed his way over the uncertain indent in the earth, now feeling his every step lest in the darkness, which increased as he ascended, he should lose his hold and be precipitated down into their midst, and to his death.

He made the fourth incline, while the shouts and yells continued beneath him.

One advantage was that the further he went the denser grew the darkness without the pale of the torches' flaring light.

It might not be so easy after all to shoot him from below, in the uncertain glimmer which now barely surrounded him.

"Yes, that's the talk—we'll bring the cuss down with a lead pill. But, who's got the pistol?"

There were quantities of weapons far in their rear, at the camp. But the miner of the ore-banks—especially at the season of the year of which we are writing—wears but four articles of clothing: boots, pants, shirt and hat, and sometimes even the boots are dispensed with.

There were no pockets in the working pants; only the outside breast-pocket of the shirt, and this contained to fullness the cheap red handker-

chief bought from the store, that charged three prices for it even if it was cheap.

No weapons appeared to be in that crowd.

And one of the cooler-headed ventured to say:

"Jim, it ain't no fool-play fer to shoot a man, you know. Maybe it's best 'at there ain't no weepins yere—"

"You just shet up, will yer?"

George Pullett had run forward to the spot where he knew the detective must have been brought to a halt by the pile of useless ore, and was busy on his hands and knees, as if searching for something there.

At that instant he cried:

"A light! Bring a torch here! Hurry up!"

"Wot's the matter?" demanded the giant, himself striding forward with a torch which he snatched from one near him.

"Look! Here's the way he went! After him, Jim! You ain't afraid to do ther same as he did, air you," and George Pullett pointed to the now discernible track of the detective's retreat.

Jim measured the width of his ponderous boots in the width of the scant line that afforded the ascent.

At first he seemed to hesitate.

Then suddenly he blurted:

"I'll fetch him, durn me if I don't!"

"Got a weepin', Jim?" interrogated one from the crowd that had quickly come forward to see what the discovery was.

The giant swung his two powerful arms over his head, with clinched fists.

"These yere's weepins enough fer me!" he declared. "I reckon I can clean him out o' thar easy enough—"

"But mebbe he's got a revolver, if he's a detective?"

"Blast the difference. Here goes fur the cuss, anyhow!"

He started out to perform the same feat accomplished by the detective.

A murmuring cheer went up from his admirers.

At the moment—when this giant bully was fearlessly going to face a man who might be well armed, while he himself apparently had no weapon for defense or attack—his popularity with the rough element gained a decided advance.

They waited below in silence as they watched his progress.

And matters then were in a period of crisis.

For when Magic had reached the end of the fourth narrow incline, to his dismay the indentation ceased.

Whoever had started out to accomplish the novel ascent had either failed or abandoned the attempt at a height of sixty feet.

At least fifteen feet remained before reaching the top edge of the abyss.

He was indeed cornered.

There was no retreat over the course he had come.

The giant Pullett was advancing.

And though those below believed that their leader was an unarmed man, he held at the time when he had finished the second course over the inclined ascent, a weapon in his teeth that no one had ever known he had carried since being in their midst.

Between his teeth and bearded lips there was firmly held a strange knife.

Its blade was broad—and broader toward the point, where the double edge, like a cimeter of a Turk, was nearly three inches across.

A terrible weapon in the gripe of a man such as was Jim Pullett.

Magic now deemed the time at hand when he should show his teeth.

Cut off from all retreat—with the edge of the embankment still many feet above him—and no going back because of the formidable and evidently murderous enemy coming after him, he adopted a desperate means at last.

Dropping all pretense at disguise, he cried:

"Keep back there, Jim Pullett! If you come further, I'll drop you like a dead duck in a marsh!"

Pullet paused, with a demoniac grin on his bearded face.

He turned toward those below, who could plainly see him in the glare of the torches.

"Did ye hear that thar?" he shouted to his followers. "Didn't I tell yer he was a-playin' off a disguise onto us? He's a detective now, fer sure—an' he's my meat! I'm a-goin' fer him, boys. Watch me!" and he resumed his way, climbing cautiously along the indent.

The crowd could not see the detective.

But his words of warning to his bolder pursuer had been distinctly heard.

Like Jim Pullet, they saw in this a complete verification of their suspicion.

The man who had been playing the part of a tramp miner was a detective.

They sent up a yowl of encouragement to their leader.

Though it was highly probable that not one there would have dared what Pullet was now daring, in the face of a threat that revolver bullets were likely to come at any moment.

Some even, in anticipation of a fusilade soon to open, stepped behind the shelter of the ore-pile.

And again came the voice of the desperate detective, warningly, while he did indeed cock his weapons:

"I give you one more chance for your life, my man! If you do not turn back at once and before I count ten, I'll certainly open fire. I have thirteen bullets here, and I am a pretty good shot, as you will find. For the last time—go back—"

"Oh! I ain't a-goin' back fer any sech cuss as you air, I ain't. Don't you see me a-comin' straight along, Mister Man?"

Pullet daringly continued the ascent.

He had reached the third line of the indent.

Magic's finger pressed the trigger of one of his drawn revolvers. He meant to shoot, but not to kill.

He did not wish to lose his game by cutting short Jim Pullett's career then and there.

He meant to give him a wound that would show him business was seriously meant.

But ere the shot could be fired something happened to alter the intention of the cornered detective.

Suddenly before him came something dangling and swinging, striking gently against his extended hand with the presented weapon of death.

A rope!

It was depending from the edge of the embankment, and had evidently been lowered purposely for him.

His quick brain comprehended this.

He grasped the rope.

Pulling it, he found that it was tight and fast above.

It was fully strong enough to bear his weight. None but a friend would have done this thing in such a moment of peril.

Thrusting his revolvers back into their pockets, he grasped the rope and began rapidly ascending, hand over hand.

He was trusting his life to the unseen.

Two minutes later an astounded cry burst from Jim Pullett.

His prey had mysteriously vanished.

CHAPTER VIII.

A TIMELY SAVIOR.

WELL was it for Mark Magic that he had been one of the most proficient attendants at the police gymnasium of the Central Station, in Baltimore City.

A practiced athlete, he was not long in gaining the top of the abyss.

He swung himself over—but still on the alert, lest this unseen friend should be one who was merely leading him out of one trap, to catch him in another.

At the moment he was again on firm ground, a voice addressed him, coming from a person whom he could barely distinguish in the gloom, and who stood back from the dizzy edge, as if awaiting his appearance.

"I am glad you are safe!"

The speaker was Frank May, the belle.

"My girl!" he exclaimed. "I owe you my life."

"I am your friend. It was a simple matter to aid you. You owe me no thanks. Besides, now that I know you are a brave man, I want you, as I before said, to assist me in finding the murderer of my husband. And I have made a discovery—Hark!"

She stepped to the verge and glanced carefully over.

A commotion was prevailing below.

The voice of Jim Pullett was heard calling:

"Say, you fellers! didn't you hear a splash down there?"

"Nary."

"But he's certain fell over, I kin swear."

"No splash down here."

And another voice:

"Did you knock him over, Jim?"

"No, I didn't. But he's certain gone down inter the pool, fer he ain't yere, an' I kin swear 'at he couldn't go nowhere else, if he didn't go down there."

Frank returned to the detective's side.

"They think you have fallen from your hold into the deep water on the floor of the mine."

"That's good!" said Magic. "If they think I am dead they won't be so much on the lookout for me."

The girl came closer.

"I've made a discovery, I think," she said, in a low tone.

"About our little case?"

"Yes."

"What is it?"

"Did you see the knife that Jim Pullett had between his teeth when he was coming up after you?"

"I did not."

"The flare of the torches showed it to me. It was only for a moment. It was a strange-looking knife—I caught its outline against the background of light below."

"Well?" as she paused.

"It was a knife broader at the point than at the hilt. It was a knife that would have made a wound in a man's skull like a wound from the edge of a mattock—"

"Ah!"

Magic uttered the aspiration despite himself.

The Head Hunter.

Keen-eyed was the girl he had entered into transient partnership with to unearth the mystery of Dick Pullett's murder.

"I have told you that I had never seen Jim Pullett with any weapon. I now can tell you that I have seen not only a weapon in his possession, but one that was very likely to have made the wound that killed my husband. We are now working straight upon the ground that Jim Pullett did kill Dick Pullett."

"You said that the name of Pullett was an adopted one, Frank. What was your husband's real name?—if he ever told you?"

"He did tell me. Some time I will reveal it to you. I have more on my mind than I can tell you just now. Let us fix the murder upon the proper party first; then you shall know all."

"You have a secret?"

"I have. It was given to me by my murdered husband. Wait until the proper time. Now I must get away from here. It won't do for the men to suspect that I am really the friend of the man whom they have decided was a detective. I am popular; but that popularity might be easily lost, with such a man as Jim Pullett running a high hand here in the mines. They think you are dead. So, in some other disguise, you may still keep in this neighborhood, and we will find a way to communicate with one another."

"I will see to that. Yes, in another disguise, my girl, I will be close at hand, never fear."

She waved her hand—a motion that he could scarcely see there in the almost total darkness—and glided away, her course being toward a path that would lead her, after a turn, down to the floor of the mine, where, on the brink of the water, the astonished group were listening to Jim Pullett's assertion that the man they had been pursuing had suddenly vanished.

And the verdict was finally reached that the missing prey must have fallen over into the deep water, the splash occasioned by the fall being unheard amid the general murmuring and shuffle of feet that prevailed.

The iron-ore mines of the counties of Maryland are no more than huge excavations, forming immense bowls throughout the series of hills bordering the railroad.

Beginning at the top of some monstrous hill, the miners gradually bring the surface down by a succession of floors—the earth becoming harder and harder at every ten-or-so feet, until the floor has reached a depth below the lowest possible sluice for drainage.

When the floor has reached a level below the possibility of running another drain, it is generally abandoned, and when the down-pour of the equinoxes comes, the floor is converted into a miniature lake, in which are deeper pools occasioned by the last efforts of the miners to sink a shaft lower than the floor itself—being the only kind of "shaft" that is sunk in the ore-bank mines.

Groves or deep woods hem the humming villages and pantaloons or cap the hilly ranges—valleys across which creep and reach immense causeways in mid-air, the "cast-off" of the mines, encroaching upon the course of purring streams whose beds of valuable pebbles gleam like myriads of nuts of dusky gold.*

The track of the B. & O. R. R. winds through and grasps for transportation trains and coils of trains of massive gondolas laden with precious ore for the distant market of furnaces.

Around, in plausible miniature, the Caledonian forests of spice and song, whose thickets, perhaps—like the Hercynian of old—were once adorned with favors from the gods, till every quivering leaf, or time-seared trunk, or turfey marl, or tangled brier, had nursed into existence beneath the Druid aisles an estimate of silent-growing millions for the puddler as the fruit of his labor and for the capitalist as the interest of his investment.

From various points of observation can be detected what seems to be a limited verging of creation into special streams, gullies, angles, mule-drives and road terraces, with the march of shapely vapors under ever softly sunny skies. The wild roses hang and breathe the abundance of their perfume around the edges of every new-sunk mine; there is a floral and vegetable psalmody in meadow and marsh.

Few of the toilers there read "the paper;" the grocery store is the grand newsalia for all.

Eleven miles distant is the great mart of Baltimore, with its vast furnaces, ready to receive and send forth in unrivaled metal, amid the smoke of inexhaustible stores from Cumberland Valley, tons and tons of ore wrested from the treacherous hill soil of the counties.

So much for the locality in which is located this narrative that is to involve singular adventures for our Baltimore detective.

At the moment when Frank reached the lower level where was congregated the excited crowd of men, they, with the giant at their head, were ascending from the flooded floor to the road.

Pullett, with his dwarf brother at his side, first came upon the girl, as she paused in their path.

* The author takes the liberty of making this digression to explain, perhaps, the difference in mines that are located in the very midst of civilization, and to show that poetry and romance are to be found therein as well as toil and grime.

He gave her a look of fury, discernible in the light of the torch which he carried.

"I b'lieve you've been up to somethin' in this yere," he blurted out, accompanying the words with an oath.

"Up to something?—how, Jim Pullett?"

"You know w'ot bekem o' the cuss, you do."

"Didn't he fall down into the water?"

"Mebbe he did an' mebbe he didn't," with an ominous nod.

"Either that, or you have killed another man."

"Another man! W'ot do you mean, say?"

"You've killed a man already, since you've been around here," said the girl, stepping close, and speaking rapidly because she wished to say her say before the crowd came too close.

And she added:

"Maybe you killed him like you killed the man in Kansas, by striking your knife into his skull—and like you killed Dick Pullett! Didn't you do that, Jim Pullett?"

His coarse face grew combinedly livid and red in streaks that were visible even through his bearded jowls.

"Look a-here, durn you, Frank May, I won't hev any sech tork as that!" he cried, taking a step with a clinched fist, as if he meant to strike her.

But the girl did not flinch; her blue eyes regarded him with a cool defiance.

He paused, with arm half-raised.

Involuntarily his head turned for an instant to cast a glance at the crowd behind him.

He seemed to realize that to strike the belle of the mines would be a serious matter.

Then, while his eyes fairly blazed, he cried, in a tone something like a guttural hiss:

"I'll be even with you fer that tork, me gal!"

"Go ahead, Jim Pullett. Why don't you strike me, as you made to do just then? I am not afraid of you, you big bully. Ha, ha! you know better!"

She turned and glided swiftly away from him as the rest of his murmuring and gabbling gang came up.

Could she have seen the strange light that shone in his wide and wicked eyes, Frank May would have thought more of her safety than she deigned to think at the time.

She really had no fear of the man, both because she felt herself fully capable of defending the title she had won as a fearless girl, and because she knew herself to be idolized by a majority of the rough miners.

Mark Magic, from the "dizzy hight," watched his recent pursuers retreating from the old mine, until they had disappeared and the torches were thrown aside.

Then he descended by another footpath to the stream.

From one of his ragged pockets he produced an adjustable lantern, and soon had a light flashing amid the dense thicket into which he had made his way at the bank of the water.

Satisfying himself that no one could be near, he began to divest himself of the abundant garb of rags that he wore.

He had come well prepared for suitable disguises in the task laid out for himself.

After the operation which totally obliterated his character of Sammy Snag, he stood there in the thicket with high boots, corduroy pants, slouch hat, blue flannel shirt; from around his person he drew forth a brand-new cart-whip.

Then from another pocket he took a peculiar stain and rubbed it carefully on his face by the aid of the lantern and a ready pocket-mirror, until he appeared to be the veriest negro that ever cracked a whip behind a mule-team.

"I guess that will do," he addressed himself, after a final survey. "And now to put in the time until I can get employment among the teams."

He started back toward the camp of mud huts where he had so very recently passed through the thrilling adventure.

To reach his destination from the spot where he had effected the transformation in himself, he had to pass through another mine, where the "proprietary carts"** were tilted, and looking like grim, awkward specters in the dark night.

He had not made half the distance across the floor—his object being to clamber up one of the "cuts" as a short way to the top—when he observed a stealthy form approaching from the very cut he was making for.

CHAPTER IX.

A STRANGE TABLEAU.

The great tool-box was close at hand, and in a trice Magic had secreted himself behind this, watching the movements of the stealthy comer.

It was a man who seemed to be pausing at every few steps to glance around, as if expecting to see some one.

The detective, not knowing who it might be, instantly suspected that it might be some one of the recent pursuers scouting about for a glimpse

* The party working a mine leaves his cart or carts standing on the floor after each day's work. This signifies a continuance of proprietorship. If the carts are not there, it is taken as a relinquishment of proprietorship, and any one can obtain permission from the owner of the hill to work the mine.

of the man whose whereabouts was still uncertain notwithstanding the majority of Pullett's gang had resolved that he must have fallen over into the sheet of water.

Some had gone so far as to hint that Pullett might have killed the man before he toppled over, knowing the villainous character of their leader.

The man came slowly forward.

"Strange," Magic heard him mutter, aloud. "What can keep the fellow? He should have been here a half-hour ago—and I thought I saw a form here a second ago?"

He moved amid the carts and once around the box.

In the latter movement, Magic moved in an opposite direction with such consummate skill that he remained unseen.

At the moment in which this was accomplished, there was a sound of heavily falling footsteps.

Another figure was approaching by the cart road into the mine.

A giant form which Magic instantly recognized as that of the ruffian, Jim Pullett.

"You've been taking your time about coming, I think," said the strange man, immediately upon Pullett's reaching his side.

"Yes," was the gruff response, "an' if you was a-doin' w'ot I've been a-doin', you'd be a little late too, I reckon."

"What's been the matter, Jim?"

"Matter enough. The detectives air a-beginnin' to scoot aroun' here too clost to be comfortable, I kin tell yer."

"Is there a detective about now?"

"Well, there is."

"What had that to do with your being late at this meeting?"

"Oh, nothin', on'y I was after him with the gang w'ot I've raised fer me own, an' the cussed cuss he got off," and Jim proceeded to relate to the strange man what had transpired, including the adventure of his brother which led to the discovery of the detective in their midst and the after events ending with what Jim announced to be a remarkable disappearance of the man they had so completely cornered on the face of the embankment.

The strange man appeared to be thoughtful.

"You don't think, then, that he fell over into the water?"

"Nary," replied the giant. "Though I hed fer to tell the boys as that war my opinion, else they'd take me fer a fool to let the man git away from me when I had him so clost."

"You think he is still dodging around?"

"That's w'ot I'm a-thinkin' pretty loud."

"Matters are getting pretty hot, then, Jim. Maybe we'd better get away from here."

"You kin suit yerself 'bout that, colonel. I'm with yer any time you air ready to levant. I'd a durn sight ruther be back inter Kansas, with the sheriff at me heels than have 'a' enemy yere to fight w'ot is so cute as to git inter the minin' camp as this yere feller is—"

"But I don't want to go, Jim, until I have made the little prize you know I have set my mind on—"

"Look a-yere, colonel," in turn interrupted the giant. "I ain't so very fond o' this kind o' life, I ain't. I'd ruther be back, as I said, inter the State where we kin make a heap more money than I'm a-makin' yere, an' with less trouble. My cash w'ot I saved out o' that last raid o' ours is about gone, an' I'm just achin' fer you to say come along inter the old trade, I am. I kin out-steal any cuss on a hoss, an' I ain't much at swingin' a mattock—"

And again interrupted the man called the colonel.

"As soon as I can get the girl into my power, I will sound the note for the West, Jim. I, too, am tired of this quiet life. But I want that girl, and I'm going to have her, if I have to drug her until she's as crazy as a bug. Now, are you ready to get to work to-night?"

"I'm O. K. ready. An' I've got brother George an' another man, an' they'll be enough, I reckon. Though the gal's a snorter when she starts, an' I foun' out to-night 'at she carries a pistol."

"Bah! What if she does carry a pistol. You have faced pistols and guns before, Jim."

"Right you air," said the giant, as the remark seemed to recall some exciting experience in his past career.

And he asked, immediately:

"Air everything ready fer to receive her, colonel? 'Cause it won't be any foolin' business when we captures that gal."

"Everything is ready. I have a room prepared for her. I shall try easy means first—then I will try the drugs, and we will all start for Kansas. What time may I look for you? You mustn't make a botch of this, Jim. Remember, I have promised you a cool three hundred when I have her safe in the prison room."

"I ain't the man to do no botches, colonel, an' you know it."

"Enough. Be off, now, and I will return to the house."

"So long," said Jim Pullett, and he turned away rapidly.

The stranger walked off in another direction.

For an instant Magic was undecided how to act.

Between these two there was evidently some deviltry afoot.

One of the men was his shadowed quarry for the murder of the young miner, Dick Pullett.

The other was one who intended to harm some girl whom he had taken a fancy to.

Should he follow the man called the colonel or the man who was about to do some dirty work for that colonel?

His mind was made up before the form of the colonel was out of sight toward the cut up through the embankment.

Like a gliding specter he followed the colonel.

He wished to know who this man was, who held secret conference with the ruffian and whose conversation had hinted that he might be a wolf in sheep's clothing there in the midst of the village community.

The trail led to a large stone mansion at the further side of the village, having an inclosure of about half an acre of ground and beautifully platted.

The man called the colonel must have been a man of wealth, Magic immediately concluded.

The trail led to a large stone mansion inclosed in a beautiful plat of an acre or more.

When the colonel entered his dwelling, the detective was not far behind.

Magic merely wished to locate the personage who held such suspicious conference with a known ruffian; he had not anticipated what now occurred as he paused for a second in the deep gloom a short distance from the gate through which his quarry had passed.

At the very moment he was about to turn away, a woman's shrill shriek rung forth, though half-smothered within the walls of the building.

In an impulse he sprung forward, but almost immediately checked himself, though continuing to advance until close to the grim walls, the windows of which were closed tight and dark.

While he waited as if for a repetition of the singular sound, a brilliant ray of light shot forth from a window in the second story, and to his ears came the murmur of voices that seemed to have a mixed accent of anger and pleading in them.

Within a few feet of where he stood, a tall tree grew and spread its leafy branches rather toward the house.

In a quick resolution, he ascended the tree until he had gained a position nearly on a level with the window.

A strange sight greeted his eyes; and now, in that elevated point of observation, he could faintly catch the words that were being uttered in the room.

A tall man, with a heavy mustache, was standing there in a menacing attitude. He grasped by one wrist a lovely and slender girl, in whose face was an expression of fright.

She was on her knees before the man.

From the fact of her having a light shawl pinned around her shoulders, Magic inferred that she had been on the point of leaving the house at the moment the colonel entered.

"So I caught you, did I?" he was exclaiming, at the instant Magic reached his perch in the tree.

The girl made no reply, as he accompanied his words by a painful wrench upon her delicate wrist, though an expression of suffering swept over her frightened face.

"Shall I do with you as I did out in Kansas, when you tried on something of the same kind as I know you were intending to-night? Tell me! Have you not learned to obey me yet?"

"Do not break my wrist, father," she faltered.

"Where were you going when I came in?"

She hesitated. And he continued:

"You were on your way to warn the girl I am after that she was in danger. Ha! I am right—I can see it. Now, let me tell you something: the girl will be here to-night. You are to be her jailer—"

"I?—her jailer?"

"Yes, you! You see, I am going to place a most precious charge in the hands of one who has already made a step to betray me. Why do I do so? Ha, ha, ha! well, let me tell you, Etta, I shall not only place her in your keeping until I am ready to secure her to myself beyond all doubt, but if you dare to allow her to escape, I shall surely kill you! Do you mark me well when I say that?—or, stop; I may give you to Jim Pullett for a wife. How would you like that, eh?"

A low, horrified cry issued from the girl's red lips.

"Oh, father, forbear! Do not speak to me of that man."

"Beware, then, how you trifle with me. I will not harm you, Etta, if you obey me; disobey me—and I will visit such punishment upon you as will make you wish you had never been born. I am going now to watch for Pullet. Is the room up-stairs ready?"

"Yes, father."

He flung loose the wrist he had been gripping, paused for a moment to gaze upon her kneeling

form and drooping head, then with quick, long strides left the room.

Magic continued his watch.

A remarkable interest had been aroused in his breast by this singular scene. There was a mystery behind all that he was resolved to penetrate.

When the door had shut behind the colonel, the girl started to her feet and stood with clinched fists, gazing toward the closed egress.

"Merciful Heaven!" she gasped forth. "Am I doomed to live this life forever? Is there to be no escape? I shall go mad—I shall go mad!" and she pressed her palms to her temples as if they throbbed then with some terrible fever in her veins.

Then she began pacing the carpet with unsteady steps, looking downward staringly and continuing to smooth and press her head like one in great mental pain.

"I shall die—I shall go mad!" she murmured again, in a low, intense way. "I cannot even escape him. And oh, God! can such a man really be my father? And if he is, will such an insult to the sainted soul of my mother be permitted as he contemplates?"

To and fro she passed, while the detective, in the screening branches of the tree outside, watched her curiously.

Magic had now concluded to see the whole affair through, in which the ruffian, Pullett, was to bring some one to the colonel's house as a captive, and who was to be given into the care of this lovely girl under the threat of a terrible penalty if that captive was allowed to escape.

So absorbed was he with his vigil, that he did not see at first the flashing of a lantern coming from the direction of the stables. His attention was attracted thither by suddenly hearing the whine of a hound—a whine that was silenced by a kick from the party carrying the lantern.

When the animal had emitted the sound, and as Magic glanced a little apprehensively in that direction, the light advanced more rapidly, and a voice not far distant said:

"Curse the dog! Why don't you keep him better trained than that, Jack Cotton?"

"That there hound, Colonel Belvidere, has been too long shut up in his kennel, he has. You cain't blame a dorg fer bein' glad fer to git out, kin ye? But he won't make no more noise, you kin depend. What tree was it you was a talkin' about?"

"This one, right here," and as Colonel Belvidere uttered the words, he paused directly beneath the tree in which the detective was concealed.

"An' you say it were a nigger?"

"Yes, I saw him distinctly. I was in that room up there, where you see the light, conversing with my daughter. I chanced to let my glance rove toward the window; the ray from the lamp cast light enough on the tree to show me the face of a nigger perched there in the branches and spying upon me."

CHAPTER X.

WHAT JIM PULLETT BROUGHT TO THE COLONEL.

MARK MAGIC realized that he had been discovered by the colonel, and that personage was now intending to capture him with the aid of the man and the hound.

They paused beneath the tree, and the colonel said:

"I do not want any niggers prowling around my premises, Cotton, and when we catch this fellow, we will give him such a lesson that he will spread the news of his discomfiture and thus keep off any others who may contemplate what I think he does—robbery. If he has not made off during the time I was running to the stable after you, we have him. He can hardly escape the fangs of the hounds, I guess, even if you fail to bring him down."

"Oh, I'll bring 'im down soon enough," boasted the man called Jack Cotton, and who was, the hidden detective could see, a man of muscular build and brutish face. "You jest watch the houn' while I scramble up the tree."

Again, and most unexpectedly, Magic found himself in a predicament. Of course, in his present disguise as a negro cart boy, he would be summarily dealt with if caught trespassing on the premises; he did not wish to use his revolvers in a case of this character.

There appeared to be no escape from an encounter with the man who had already commenced to ascend the tree.

At that juncture Etta came to the sill and leaned out, looking down upon the men with the lantern.

The colonel saw her.

"Get away from there, Etta," he said; adding, in the coolest manner possible: "we are about to shoot a nigger, and there is no need of your exposing yourself to a chance bullet. Step back from the window."

The girl vanished, taking with her the lighted lamp that was upon the table.

This action on her part almost brought a betrayed cry of satisfaction from the cornered detective.

While the man called Cotton was ascending the tree—making considerable noise at his climbing—Magic glided like a snake out upon the branch toward the window.

At the end of the branch, which sunk lower with his weight, he was within three feet of the sill.

Collecting his strength for an effort, he launched himself forward, grasping the sill as he fell; and the next instant had swung himself over into the darkness of the apartment.

"What was that?" demanded the colonel, as he heard the sound caused by the recoiling branches.

"W'ot was w'ot?" returned the man.

"Did you make that noise?"

"I reckon I'm a-makin' a heap o' noise, colonel. I ain't so light weighted as I was some years ago. But I can match 'ary nigger w'ot kin climb a tree, an' don't fergit it."

"Where are you? Do you see him yet?"

"Ain't caught sight o' the cuss. I'll be onto him presen'y though. W'ot's the matter 'th the dorg?"

"He wants to get loose."

"Hold onter 'im. We don't want 'im loose 'less the nig gits away from me. Keep 'im in."

Magic knew the location of the door in the apartment, having noted it while the room was lighted.

Toward this he groped his way.

He opened the door and stepped out into a broad hallway.

To be confronted by the girl, Etta, who held the lamp aloft and demanded, while she faced him without the slightest trace of fear in her features:

"What do you want here?"

She believed the intruder to be a negro.

"Hush!" Magic requested, laying one finger on his lips, and bending to listen to ascertain whether his mode of escape from the tree had been discovered.

"What do you want in this house?" she asked again, a little more sharply.

"Miss, I am not a negro," he replied, pulling shut the door, that the light she carried might not shine through, and give a suggestion to the searchers below.

"Not a negro? Then who and what are you, and why are you here?"

"I am here to be your friend if you will permit me to become such," Magic said, scanning the lovely countenance as he spoke.

"I do not know that I am particularly in need of a friend."

"Oh, yes you are, if the scene I saw in this room a few minutes ago was serious," pointing to the room from which he had emerged.

"What did you see in there?"

"I saw you on your knees; the man you called your father threatened to kill you or give you in marriage to some fellow upon whom you look with abhorrence, if you did not consent to obey him in some dark scheme which he is promulgating. Now, miss, if you will just give me some explanation about that scene, I will be very much obliged to you, and perhaps I can afford you the chance to escape the man you fear—"

"Who are you?" came the interruption from the red lips.

"I am this."

With which Magic turned off a part of his disarming jacket, revealing under the lapel of a better vest that was beneath the cart-boy's blouse, the badge of his office.

"Ah, you are a detective?"

"I am."

Her orbs seemed to accumulate a brighter luster as she gazed fixedly upon him for a second.

Then, and to his astoundment, she did something highly alarming and indicative of the fact that he was mistaken in his idea that the girl was sorely in need of a friend.

Suddenly from her pocket she drew a small silver whistle.

With the whistle she blew a blast that rung out through the window at the further end of the hall into the night, and reached the ears of the colonel and the man in the tree.

Upon hearing the signal—which was evidently one of danger well understood between father and daughter—the colonel dropped his hold on the leash of the hound and sprung toward the rear entrance of the house.

The hound, released, made a quick bound toward the gate at the front of the premises, where had just then appeared three forms in the starry dun.

Jack Cotton hastened to descend from the tree, aware that something important was transpiring within the house, and he reached the ground in time to see that the beast was attacking the comers at the gate.

There were loud curses in several voices in the direction of the gate, the hound was snarling as he sprung upon the nearest figure, tearing with his monstrous teeth into the fellow's clothing, if not into his flesh.

"Gip! Gip! Gip!" called Cotton. "Here—here, you beast—come here," but in vain.

A battle was being waged there between man and brute.

The hound, with a knowledge that he had been brought from his kennel to attack some one, had selected these arrivals.

Cotton ran at full speed and laid both strong hands upon Gip, dragging him backward and forcing him to loose his hold on his supposed foe.

"Cuss you an' your dorg, Jack Cotton!" ex-

The Head Hunter.

claimed the voice of the giant, Jim Pullett, as he examined himself to see whether the dog had succeeded in fastening a bite into his flesh.

"Why, I couldn't help it, Jim. I hadn't nothing to do with it, I hadn't. The colonel hed a holt onto him, an' when the whistle blowed, he dropped the leash an' scooted fer the house. We've been chasin' a nigger w'ot's been prowlin' around yere, an', mayhap, by the soun' o' the whistle—thich the same must a' been blowed by Miss Etta—the feller we're after is in the house now."

"Is the colonel up there?"

"He air."

"Well, we wants ter see him, an' that mighty quick—"

"W'ot have ye got there?" asked Cotton, as he glanced now toward two men who were with Pullett and carried a huge sack between them, standing in the background.

"Never mind w'ot we've got, Jack. We want to see the colonel right quick, so hold that durned dorg tight while we gits up ter the house."

"All right, Jim; go ahead," and he held the straining animal fast, while Pullett and the two accompanying him followed, bearing the sack with its apparently heavy contents.

Meantime, Colonel Belvidere had bounded up the stairs within the house, making for the hall on the second floor.

Here he found Etta standing alone and with an excited flush in her face.

"Did you sound that whistle?" he demanded.

"I did."

"What's the matter? We never use that call unless in a moment of extreme danger—"

"There is danger," she interrupted.

"Ha! What like?"

The detective had disappeared.

"Father, though you have abused me and made me often the tool of your wickednesses, still I cannot forget that I am your daughter, and I would save you if I can."

"Bah! what are you talking about."

"You are in danger."

"I am?"

"Yes."

"In what way?"

"Detectives are on your track."

He turned slightly pale.

"Oh, I guess they've been on my track ever since we cleared out from Kansas. That is nothing—"

"And one has been inside this very house within five minutes."

His face grew paler, and an ugly gleam came into his eyes.

"Explain, Etta."

"You were looking for a man in a tree outside."

"Yes."

"That man came into the house by swinging from the branches into the room where we were a few minutes ago, and I have seen and spoken him where I am now standing."

"By the furies!" burst from the mustached colonel. "And where is he now?"

"I cannot say. But he went that way."

She pointed toward the forward part of the hall.

He ran to the window that opened upon the top of a broad porch roof. Thrusting his head forth, he endeavored to pierce the darkness for some sign of the man.

"What manner of man was it?" he asked, returning to his daughter's side after a few seconds.

"I can give no description of him other than that he was positively disguised as a negro—a negro cart-boy such as I have seen in your mine over the hills."

At this juncture there came a rough, peremptory voice from below, calling:

"Hullo, there, colonel! Whar air you, anyhow?"

"Here," he answered, as he hurried in the direction of the caller, for he recognized the voice of Jim Pullett.

Pausing at the head of the flight, he said, turning briefly:

"Go to the room we have prepared. The men have come with my prize."

The girl cast a peculiar look upon him and turned toward a flight of stairs at one side. She ascended these slowly to a room on the third floor.

By the time she had reached the apartment and set the lamp upon the table, there was a sound of footsteps coming after her, and in another minute the colonel, with Jim Pullett and his brother, the dwarf, entered, carrying the mysterious sack.

"That will do, now," Belvidere said. "Just place the thing on the lounge there, and you may go."

"Remember, colonel, the price o' this," remarked the giant, as the order was obeyed and the villainous two started to depart.

"I will not forget; and you will find me as good as my word."

The father, the daughter and the sack were alone together.

He pointed to the sack.

"The girl I have been speaking to you about is in there, Etta. Take her out the best way you can and get her into some sort of presentable ap-

pearance for me when I shall find it convenient to interview her. There is more in this than a mere love-making affair, as you will find out if I am successful."

He left the room.

Almost mechanically Etta went to the sack and began to remove it from its human contents.

Then, when the coarse thing was off entirely, she gazed down upon a strangely beautiful face. The face of Frank May, the belle of the mines.

CHAPTER XI.

THE BELLE A PRISONER.

By the time Etta had accomplished the task of relieving the form of Frank May of the encumbering sack, the latter was showing signs of returning consciousness; for she had been in a totally unconscious condition while being carried thither by her evident abductors, Pullett, his brother and another rascal.

Etta stepped back, surveying the beautiful and half-wild looking girl of the mines.

Frank started to a sitting posture, rubbed her eyes with her hands and then glanced bewilderedly about.

Her blue eyes were not long in regaining their wonted luster, and they flashed a querying stare upon the other young girl.

"Where am I, and who are you?" she asked, a little suppressedly, like one just awakening from a strange dream.

"I am Etta Belvidere."

"Belvidere? I do not think I know that name."

"You will know it too well, shortly," said Etta, significantly, and nodding her own proudly lovely head.

"What do you mean?"

"Can you not guess?"

"Guess?—no, I do not exactly understand just what has happened. Yet, I know something has happened—Ha! yes, I remember: Jim Pullett came to my cabin; he stayed awhile with various excuses, and when it grew late and I told him he must go, he laughed and said he wasn't going without me. When he said something else that alarmed me, I drew my revolver and would have shot the wretch if he had come any closer—for he raised one of his dirty hands and came toward me—when another leaped in through the window behind me; the pistol was knocked from my grasp; I was seized and—But I forgot after that."

Frank, still a little dazed by her position and a faulty remembrance of what had occurred to bring her where she was, passed one hand wearily across her brow.

"You are now in the house of Colonel Lucius Belvidere."

"And who is he?"

"I heard that you lived in the mines and roamed the country hereabout," Etta said, inquiringly.

"True."

"Then you must have heard of Colonel Belvidere."

"Ah, yes, now I do remember. He is a very wealthy man."

"A very wealthy man," assented Etta, regarding the captive in an impassive manner.

"And who is Colonel Belvidere?"

"My father."

"And—What is your name?" Frank put, suddenly.

"My name is Etta Belvidere. I told you that before."

Frank arose and took a few steps across the room.

Then her gaze detected that the windows of the apartment were protected by heavy and strong bars of iron; the door itself had a strangely massive appearance.

Her composure was gradually returning to her.

"Why am I here?" she inquired, looking Etta straight in the eyes and searchingly.

"You are the prisoner of Colonel Belvidere."

"Prisoner!"

Etta nodded. And she was thinking, as she mentally formed an opinion of this rarely beautiful being whom her father had kidnapped for some deep purpose:

"My father thinks he has in his power a puny girl whom he can twist to his will. Let us see. For unless I am greatly mistaken, this girl will die in her tracks sooner than submit to tyranny or insult."

"Will you please tell me why I am here, a prisoner of Colonel Belvidere's?" questioned the belle, quietly, though there was just the slightest flash in the blue eyes as she spoke.

"I may tell you a part of the reason."

"Well?"

"He wishes to wed you—"

"Ha, ha, ha!" broke in Frank, with a laugh that had a note of hardness in it. "Well, and what is the rest of the reason?"

"That you will learn from him."

The captive was now fully herself.

The effect of the drug which had been administered by her abductors had completely worn off, hastened by her own wonderful power of will.

She walked closer to this lovely girl of her own sex, and said:

"Will you please send your father, this Colonel Belvidere, to me as soon as you can? I want to know exactly what manner of game he is up to. Then I can show him exactly what manner of girl he has got hold upon when he tries on this sort of thing with me."

"You are a very fearless girl!" remarked Etta.

"Fearless? Why, bless your heart, my friend," in a patronizing style of speech, "I was born just that way. I am not afraid of anybody—not even this Colonel Belvidere. Send him in here, won't you? I want to see what kind of a man he is—Why do you shudder?" as she noticed an involuntary shrugging of Etta's shoulders, while the daughter of the colonel half averted her head.

"Why do you shudder?"

"You do not know Colonel Belvidere—I do."

"A bad man, eh?" queried Frank.

"He will accomplish his purpose with you."

"Oh! no he won't."

"You will see. He will starve you, as—as-as he once did me, into submission."

Frank extended one of her brown and plump arms.

"Do you see that?" she asked, pointing to a large blue vein that ascended from the wrist.

"Yes."

"Then let me tell you something: I can live on my own blood for awhile—until those who will miss me and search every foot of ground through this county for me, will be sure to find me!"

"I cannot talk longer with you. It is nearly daylight. You had better get some sleep. I will bring you your food, and—" pausing and gazing sorrowfully at Frank—"and God save you!"

She departed from the room, locking the door after her.

Frank immediately examined her prison room closely.

She was forced to realize that she was indeed a prisoner, in the clutches of a man of whom she knew no more than what rumor had carried about the neighborhood on the north side of Deep Run.

Colonel Lucius Belvidere, upon coming to the neighborhood, had immediately procured privilege from the land-owner on the south side of the run to work a mine—paying heavily for the privilege, besides the usual "ore-leave."

Jim Pullett was his "boss."

Whether the mine was paying the colonel or not, no one could assert. He had his share of the gondolas that were sent to the switch by the B. & O. R. R.; he always paid his hands promptly; more than all, he did not keep a store, as most of the workers of the mines do, so that what little the hard-working miners did earn, they could spend to the best advantage wherever they chose.

In two cases out of three, the worker of a mine is a storekeeper. The wages run from ninety cents to one dollar and fifteen cents per day. The miners are compelled to deal at the store of their employer, who thus makes for himself a profit on the wages he pays out.

And the difference in the price of goods bought in the vicinity of the mines and in the city is so great, that if the miner was permitted to spend his wages to the best advantage, he could afford to go to the city, at the expense of car fare and even then buy and return at far less cost than at his own country store!

Moreover, the miners get in debt to their employer, the storekeeper, and the chances are nine against one that they will never get "out," being kept down to a pittance from the moment of the first indebtedness.

With the wealthy Colonel Belvidere there was nothing of this kind; he paid his hands regularly—and what was more, he did not seem to care to be bothered with their hanging anywhere around the vicinity.

The man who had assisted the Pullett brothers in bringing the drugged girl to the house of the colonel, was dismissed by the elder Pullett when arriving at the rear entrance of the stone mansion.

He departed—though the inquisitive Cotton sought to detain him with several questions regarding the mysterious sack.

The Pulletts were evidently quite familiar with the interior of the great dwelling, for after having placed the abducted girl upon the lounge at the command of Belvidere, they descended to the second floor and Jim led the way to a room that was appropriated for library uses at the far rear of the corridor.

A light burned here, possibly in anticipation of these very visitors.

"Jes' squat," said Jim, himself appropriating a chair and thumping his colossal body into it with a grunt of satisfaction at the ease it afforded. "The colonel'll be yere in a minute."

Then he added, as his glance roved around the articles of luxurious comfort with which the apartment was provided:

"Welvits! Springs inter ther chairs! Look a' this yere carpet w'ot I'm a-grindin' me heel inter! Say, Georgy, w'ot's the reason we couldn't a' saved our share o' the proceeds tell we'd been able fer ter sport somethin' like this style, eh?"

"Cause we was cussed fools, I reckon," replied the dwarf, scowling around him, as if in a mood for furious envy that the colonel should be so elegantly circumstanced.

"Jest take a peek inter them drawers, Georgy," said Jim Pullett, pointing toward the draws that formed the base of a high and magnificent cabinet.

The dwarf advanced to the drawers and cautiously pulled them out, one after another. When he came to the last, he turned upon his giant brother with a strange look in his ugly swart face.

"W'ot hev you foun', Georgy?" asked Jim, in a suppressed tone.

The other beckoned him forward.

Then the two gazed down upon a veritable treasure-treasure they knew, for these men were well posted upon the value of various ores. And that which they saw was a pile of ore so rich with gold as to be nearly pure gold itself, each piece, and the pieces, dozens in number, were piled closely in sizes of about two pounds or more.

"Nuggets, er I'm a liar!" burst from Jim; and the accent was so unguardedly loud that both turned toward the door, apprehensive that the words had been heard by the owner of the treasure.

The dwarf suddenly uttered something like a hiss, raising one finger warningly.

A light footstep was heard approaching along the hallway.

Colonel Belvidere entered. He had not remained many seconds in the room where his captive had been placed.

The Pulletts were seated innocently at opposite sides.

But something seemed to whisper to him, as he cast a keen glance into their ugly faces, that they had been up to some mischief in the brief time they had been there.

"What have you been doing?" he instantly demanded, in the tone of a man who believes in his power to read the human countenance correctly.

"We?" responded the giant, with assumed astonishment. "Why, w'ot do you mean? Doin'? We've been a-waitin' fer you to come, colonel. But es Georgy an' me ain't just quite used to these yere ornaments, we ain't, we bekem kind o' uneasy like," and he hitched unrestedly in his springy seat to give emphasis to his speech.

Belvidere advanced to the table on which burned the great argand and took a fat wallet from his inner pocket.

"I promised you three hundred as soon as the girl was safe in my hands," he said.

"Edzactly," replied Jim, as his bleared orbs fixed hungrily on the wallet, and he leaned forward in his seat as if about to launch himself upon the money displayed.

"Here it is."

Adding, as he handed the amount over into the greedy clutch of the giant:

"So much for that. Now, what about the skull?"

Jim scratched his head.

"Wal, colonel, I'm afraid we're still off the track. After I'd dosed the gal and put'er inter the sack, me an' Georgy yere searched the hull durned cabing whar the gal lives at. We foun' Dick's trunk easy enuff; but nary skull—"

"Curse it!" burst from the colonel, springing from his chair and starting to pace the floor, while he smote his palms together just once and forcibly. "Are we never to get hold upon that thing, after all the trouble we've been to?"

"Wal, it does 'pear a little that-a-way," assented Jim, with a perplexed nod of his unkempt head.

"I tell you, Jim, I must have that skull! It is as important to me as the possession of this girl herself. And I will not leave this vicinity until I get it, if a dozen detectives come scenting around here after the whole of us!"

CHAPTER XII.

"THET MAN'S A HOWLIN' LIAR, HE IS!"

"WAL," said the giant, "mayhap you're right. I was onc't kinder anxious myself fer to git holt on the skull, an' know 'at it wos buried about es deep es a post-hole spade ked drap it; but then, there's other things kem up since Dick wos killed, you know, colonel, an', es I told you afore this evenin', the detectives air gittin' kinder too thick an'sly 'round about yere—"

"Ha! Jim, I fear that one has been right inside this house to-night."

"You don't tell me!"

And the eyes of the dwarf blazed with something like a combined rage and terror as his brother uttered the exclamation.

"There was a negro perched in a tree outside my house, watching Etta, my daughter, and myself. I chanced to see him. He came into the house, undoubtedly by the branches of the tree, and was met by Etta. I had Cotton and the hound under the tree, and we might have caught him but for his readiness for expedient. Fact is, I was interrupted by your arrival at the moment she was telling me about him. I did not have time to ask her what transpired, which way he went, or anything else. He was either a genuine negro cart-boy, or disguised as such—"

"Bet yer life it's the same feller!" exclaimed Jim, looking at his dwarf brother.

"Yes, cuss 'im!" said George. "Them detectives air up to all sorts o' disguises."

"But he has no doubt cleared himself out ere this," Belvidere pursued, "since he found that I knew of his presence and was looking for him. And now, boys, as it is nearly morning, you had better be going. Take a drop of something, and then light out."

He produced a decanter and glasses, which he set upon the table, motioning the two to come forward and help themselves.

They drank a copious draught—as much as each glass would hold, in fact—then, smacking their lips and wiping the same on their rough coat-sleeves, started from the room, Belvidere leading the way.

As they disappeared beyond the doorway, a human head and face came into view above the molding around the top of the high cabinet, and a pair of shrewd eyes watched after them.

The face of the supposed negro cart-boy, the disguised detective, Mark Magic!

Assured of their departure, he nimbly swung himself down to the floor and tip-toed along the hall.

Belvidere returned after the lapse of a few minutes, re-entering the library, and muttering as he came:

"They are old and tolerably well-tried rogues in my service, but it is never well to trust such too far. Let me see whether they have disturbed my ore-box, which I inadvertently left unlocked."

He advanced to the cabinet. Still in his mind he was suspicious of the pair, as he had been on the first instant of his coming into the library.

He drew out the drawer, and seemed to satisfy himself that everything remained undisturbed.

Closing the drawer, he was about to turn away when his gaze was arrested by something singular.

On the mahogany panel of the cabinet front written boldly in chalk, were these words:

"The skull is safe with Dick Pullett's friend!"

Upon reading the mysterious chalk-marks, he clapped one hand to his brow, and gasped:

"By the furies! He has been here, within this very room—no doubt overheard my conversation with Pullett!"

Wheeling, he made his way up-stairs to his daughter's room.

"Have you gone to bed, Etta?" he inquired, as a response came to his rather sharp rapping on the girl's door.

"Not yet."

"Then I want to speak with you."

"Come in; I am reading."

Belvidere entered and found his daughter sitting by the lamp that burned on the table. A glance showed him that the book she was engaged with was a small Bible.

"Etta, I had not time to question you regarding the negro cart-boy whom you say you saw in the house after you left the room where we had been conversing. Which way did he go after you blew the whistle summoning me to meet a danger?"

"That I cannot say. I did not see."

"What! And standing face to face with him?"

"True! But the very moment I sounded the call, he leaned forward close to me with a quick motion, and before I could realize what it was he meant to do, he had blown out the light. I barely had the lamp lighted again when you returned from the outside of the house, and I told you of what I had seen. He must have made good his escape in the darkness. But I repeat what I told you then: he is no negro cart-boy, but a disguised detective. There can be no doubt of it."

"Why are you so sure?"

"Because he actually showed me his badge."

"He did that?"

"Yes."

"Why did he do it? Was he trying to force you to tell anything that he wished to know particularly?"

"He offered to be my friend, if I needed one."

"Your friend? Why should he have done that?"

"He saw the scene and heard the words that passed between us in the room, where the window opens close to the tree."

The colonel grew slightly pale, and his fists clinched tightly as he realized that detectives must be close—dangerously close indeed; and beyond all doubt, Belvidere had good cause to dread the keen scent of the detectives for other reasons than what has already been shown to the reader of the man.

"Did the girl recover consciousness before you left her?" he asked abruptly, while clearing the transient frown from his brow, and alluding to Frank May.

"Yes."

"What did she seem to think of her situation? How did she take it? You told her where she was, as I instructed you?"

"I did. She is very defiant. You may find

that she is not the girl I am, to be so easily frightened into obeying another's will."

"Bah! I have trained men, Etta; I am not to be balked by a mere girl. But you need have no cause to complain about my treatment if you are a good girl and obey me—"

"A good girl," she broke in, though quietly and with curling lips. "Do you think that I can do your bidding and be a good girl such as this book would teach me to be?" and with one hand, she pointed toward the leaves of the book she held in the other hand.

More abruptly than before, he said:

"Take the girl her breakfast at the proper time. And tell her that I will see her shortly after she has eaten it. You may also inform her, Etta, that you heard me say it would be the last mouthful she would ever get if she proved at all obstinate when I came to make my demands."

"I will tell her."

Belvidere withdrew.

His mind was sorely worried. The fact that a detective was even spying within the walls of his own house, and had heard both the words of the scene with his daughter and, probably, the dialogue between himself and his ruffian satellites, was good cause for such mental uneasiness.

"By Hades!" he ejaculated. "I shall myself institute a search for the fellow, and if once I can spot him, it will not be my fault if he does not follow the fate of Dick Pullett!"

Mark Magic could not at once leave the house with safety after finding an opportunity to escape from the library, where he had paused, in his insuppressible spirit of desire to frighten Belvidere, to write the strange words on the cabinet.

He knew by what he had heard, that some young girl had been abducted and brought to the colonel's house; he gathered, by supposition based upon the utterances of Belvidere, that he alluded to the skull which had been shown to him by the belle of the mines; and now resolved to shadow Belvidere to his utmost ability, he applied himself first to the task of getting out of the great stone house, that he might have time to plan for future operations and consult with his ally, Frank May.

He little dreamed that the girl in the sack could be Frank.

At last, by one of the parlor windows he let himself out upon the velvety sward and moved toward the shadows of an adjacent thicket of shrubbery.

But not ten steps had he taken when there was a sudden cry, a sharp yelp as from the throat of a hound.

A man and a powerful dog appeared directly before him, the latter coming at great bounds to tear him with wide-open jaws.

"Reckon I'm the best scenter in the heap!" exclaimed the coarse voice of Cotton. "Fer I've jest cornered the nigger after all—"

And then he stopped short in his tracks.

The report of a revolver broke the stillness of the night air, and the huge animal, Gip, gave vent to one short, piercing yowl and fell over on one side, quivering in the throes of death.

By the time Cotton recovered from his astonishment at this unlock-for action on the part of the negro intruder, Magic had gained the clump of shrubbery; and now that there was no danger from the scenting nozzle of the dog, he leisurely began snaking his way in the darkness, his noiseless movements completely baffling Cotton, who immediately bounded into the shrubbery, smiting ragefully here and there with a stout bludgeon which he carried, in the idea that at least a chance stroke might reach the negro's head.

While Cotton was still thrashing the bushes, Magic emerged at a far side and gained the gully beside the railroad track outside the enclosure.

Here he paused and rolled up his sleeves. From his pocket he drew forth the cosmetic-like stain with which he had blackened his face, and rolling up his sleeves, he applied the stain as carefully as possible in the semi-gloom of the stars, until the skin of the arms above the elbows was as black as the face.

Then he took out two sashoons and inserted them in his boots, an operation which caused him to appear at least two inches higher when completed.

These were wise additions to his disguise, as after events proved.

Following the railroad, Magic reached the "Whirligig"—a grocery and (former) liquor store not far from the station.

Indications of dawn were now in the east.

He approached the porch, on which was a rude bench, and cast himself down on his back to wait the bursting of daylight.

At an early hour the storekeeper was astir, and the first object to greet his eyes, as he came forth to open his shutters, was the sleeping figure of the negro cart-boy.

"Hullo, nig, what'r you doing here?" he demanded. "This ain't no hotel. Don't allow no sleepin' round this place."

Magic slowly awoke—or seemed to—staring stupidly at the man who had paused to contemplate him.

"I ain't got no home, boss," he said, "an' I

jest drapp'd down heyar for to wait till you'd come along an' give me a show fer some work." "Lookin' for work, eh?" "Yes, boss." "Where'd you come from?" "I's been a-workin' down 'bout the landin'." "What at?" "Drivin'." "Cart-boy, eh?" "Yes, boss." "Are you a pretty good hand?" "Well, yes, boss. I knows a heap 'bout hosses. I's been up inter the mines 'bove Piedmont, too, handlin' the mules down in the yearth up there. But I wasn't makin' no money at all over to the landin', so I jest footed it over heyar las' night an' thought I might git a job heyar."

"How much did you get over there?" "On'y seven dollars a month an' board." "We pay a little better than that here, we do. You can wait round awhile an' maybe my partner an' I can give you somethin'."

"Thankee, boss—"

"*That man's a howlin' liar, he is!*" shouted a hoarse and deep voice from the building adjoining the store.

The storekeeper and the supposed cart-boy glanced in the direction of the interrupting voice.

Jim Pullett, with a thunder-black visage, stood there, his muddy-red eyes bent upon the negro.

CHAPTER XIII.

A CART-WHIP DUEL.

AT the moment, several miners, on their way from their humble homes on the north side of the stream, to the mines opposite, and swinging their kettles on their arms, happened to be passing the store.

Hearing the voice of Pullett, which they recognized, uttering words that were indicative of trouble with some one, they halted and stared toward the low porchway.

Pullett, with his pockets filled with his share of the money paid for his villainous part in the abduction of the night gone, had stopped at the house of one of his gang of roughs, where he knew there was always on hand a demijohn of ardent spirits.

He and the man, with the bottle and glasses between them, after a heavy draught as a "starter," had seated themselves for a game of cards until the time came for Jim to be at the mines to boss the men.

By the time the first game, accompanied by several drinks, had been played, Jim perceived that daylight was at hand and arose to take his departure.

He knew there would not be time to seek his own hut in the mining-camp for a meal before going to work, and had stepped into the store by another door to get a snack made up for himself, when he was attracted by the conversation between the storekeeper and the cart-boy.

Instantly he suspected that this wandering cart-boy might be the identical cart-boy spoken of by his employer, the colonel, as having been intrudingly in the latter's house during the by-gone night. At least, he determined to satisfy himself whether such was the case or not.

"You air a liar, you air," he added, addressing the negro. "You ain't no more a cart-boy 'an I am. An' I'll bet you ain't even a nigger. Come, now," and he glared at the detective.

Magic had not expected to meet Pullett on this side of the stream; this was rather a perilous encounter for his plan of operations, which had been formed as he came to the store.

He affected to grin at what might be a drunken man just getting up, and only half awake after a night's debauch.

"De Lor', boss!" he rejoined. "In co'se I isn't goin' fo' to call you a liyah back ag'in. But I's a cart-boy from de landin' fo' shuah, I is—"

"You air, eh?"

Pullett seemed to consider something cunningly for a moment, as he interrupted and cast a glance upon the miners who had stopped to see what could be the matter with the well-known bully.

"Deed I is, boss."

"Then you're a-goin' to git a purty good maulin' before I'm done with you, that's all."

"A maulin', boss?"

Pullett came closer and growled so low that the others couldn't hear, and said:

"You cussed detective, I kin see through that har disguise jest es plain es if you hadn't any black'nin' onter yer face, I kin, an' don't fergit it."

Magic instantly conceived an idea that would prove a great diversion, probably in his favor. Of course the man had penetrated his disguise—or had made up his mind that he had—and something must be done to alter the aspect of the scene.

In this, his old spirit of mischief came paramount.

"Oh, all right, boss, if everybody else's willin', I ain't no objections. On'y I mus' hev fair play, dat's all," he said, in a loud voice and much to Jim's astonishment.

"W'ot air you sayin'?" he demanded, gazing into the black face with a stupid stare.

"Why, I's willin' fo' to do w'ot you wants me to do, sah."

"W'ot did I want you to do?" demanded Jim, utterly puzzled by the, to him, enigma remark.

Magic turned and addressed the little knot of miners.

"Dis yahr gen'l'm'n challenged me fo' to fight him, he did, with the kyart whips. He's done called me a liyah. An' I says I's willin' fo' to 'commode 'im ef you gen'l'm'n says I shell hev fa'r play wid him, dat's it—"

"Wal, durn yer black hide!" burst from the astounded Pullett, while his bleared eyes dilated with an inexpressible wideness.

And he started to protest that he had never uttered anything of the kind. But the miners rather enjoyed the prospect of a little set-to there in the early morning, as a sort of appetizer for work, and two or three, in a breath, shouted:

"Oh, you mustn't back out, Jim!"

"Nary, if you challenged the nigger, that's your lookout if he took you up—"

"Heyar, gimme a whip!" he cried, to the storekeeper, his eyes fairly blazing with rage.

Now more than ever did he believe that the supposed cart boy was the disguised detective; and this trick made him furious, for he saw, dull-witted though he might appear that it was a trick to lead him into an encounter.

The peculiar twinkle that came into the orbs of his prospective antagonist settled the matter in his mind. He resolved, in that one instant, to give the other such a drubbing and slashing as would nearly wipe out his life.

Indeed, he began to congratulate himself, even in that transient space, that here was an opportunity to take vengeance on the shrewd man who had eluded him when at first beset by him and his ruffian gang at the mining-camp.

The storekeeper partook of the enthusiasm which the contemplated battle aroused.

Others came upon the scene and halted to see the fun, for the announcement of the exhibition was given them with ready alacrity.

Pullett rushed into the store after the proprietor.

Magic proceeded to roll up his ragged sleeves and take the whip which he carried from its coil over his shoulder in the coolest manner possible.

"You're going to be basted up fine, nig!" remarked one of the foremost who were forming a ring around the spot selected as by universal consent for the trial of strength and endurance.

"Dat's w'ot you t'ink, gen'l'm'n."

"Oh, there won't be a shred left of the moke after Jim gets through with him," expressed another.

"I'll be dar w'en dey picks up de pieces," was the response of the detective, apparently the coolest man in the crowd.

Then there issued a yell from the door of the store, and the towering figure of Pullett, with cart-whip in hand, came with bull-like rush toward the waiting adversary.

He had not paused for any special preparation. He deemed his own enormous strength sufficient to overpower the man with the blackened face; he really meant to deliver such blows with either lash or butt of the whip as would be likely to remove the hated detective from his vicinity forever, either by crippling or killing him outright.

"Keerfu' dar, boss," Magic said, grinning, as a negro would under similar circumstances.

"Ef you loses yo' head at de start, yo' ain't goin' to win, shuah! You yarhs me! An' I don't want fo' to hurt you much—"

"Hold on, Jim—hold on!" interposed the storekeeper, pushing forward interceptingly. "If you're going to fight the moke, do it with some style about you. I'll bet a dollar you can't stand up an' take the lash as long as he can?"

"I can stan' it till there ain't a hair left onter his cussed black hide!" shouted the furious giant.

"Fair play, now, an' a straight fight. Get inside the ci cle an' stand toe to toe."

Pullett started to object. But the crowd of miners seconded the suggestion of the store-keeper.

The giant and the negro were placed face to face, their toes fixed at a mark separating them only about eighteen inches.

Pullett looked at the arm of his antagonist, and saw that there was a wonderful muscle there. Moreover, the fact that the negro's sleeves were rolled up above the elbow seemed to perplex him; for it began to look as if it really was a negro he was about to combat with. The idea, as it came upon him, inspired him with a sort of disgust that he should have been placed in such a predicament.

But when he recalled that it had been brought about by a cunning trick on the part of the grinning African, he redoubled his rage and raised the whip on high to begin the war of lashes.

"Ready?" called the storekeeper.

"Yes, boss, I's ready," replied Magic, poising himself in a way that plainly revealed to those looking on that he was an athlete of no mean formidableness.

W-h-i-r-r-s-wish-thuck!

The brand new whip which Pullett had secured performed a circle in the air and then wrapped itself around the body of the negro with terrible force, fairly cutting into the garments.

The stroke had been aimed at the neck. But Magic, by a spring of remarkable activity, ascended from the ground just far enough to save his neck and catch the coiling lash upon his body.

Then, ere the lash could be disengaged, his own whip began a wonderful succession of strokes that brought a murmur of astonishment from the bystanders!

Crack! crack! crack!

Twice, thrice the terrible lash cut into the cheeks and neck of Pullett alternately, the weapon being handled in such a way that there was no coiling, but returning to the sinuous end at every stroke ready for another.

Crack! crack! crack!

Again and again, while Pullett howled in pain and vainly tugged to loosen his own whip, the lash of the other struck hard and mercilessly, bringing blood at every cut.

The face of the bully was red and livid in streaks.

He succeeded in wrenching his whip loose from the body of his antagonist.

Then a cry went up from the spectators, as they saw him gripe the black-cat by the slim end and poise the heavy butt for a murderous stroke.

"Fair play!" some one shouted.

And then:

"Give the nig a f'ar show, there!"

"No foul!"

"Shame!"

"That ain't no good way, Jim!"

But the strange scene went on even while these and other cries ascended in shouts and murmurs on the early morning air.

With bloody face, half-blinded by the blood and his own rage, Pullett made a terrific dash upon the negro, reaching with his left hand to catch the other's whip and stop its fierce strokes that cut into his flesh at a rate that was marvelous.

He raised the butt over his adversary's head and brought it down with all his giant strength.

But the spry detective "wasn't there," to use a familiar expression. By a movement aside so quiet that it was hardly perceptible, the butt descended upon air alone, and the next instant Pullett threw up his arms and reeled backward.

Magic had delivered a tremendous left-hand blow with his fist that took the forward-bent body of the giant directly under the ear, at the junction of the jaw.

Over went Pullett with a stunning thump on the dusty road.

And as they turned to look at the fallen man, Magic dashed off up the road, as if he expected to be overhauled and beaten by the white comrades of the worsted bully—a proceeding which seemed to be in full accordance with the character he was adopting.

When Pullett regained his full senses and lurched upward to his feet, he gazed around him in a sort of grimly-grinning way that actually had a disgusted sadness in it.

"Ain't dead yet, air you, Jim?" inquired one dryly.

"No, but I might as well be, I'm a-thinkin', ef that thar detective gits holt o' me ag'in."

"W'ot's thar 'bout a detective?"

"Sho! You fellers didn't know w'ot you was a-tokin' 'bout—I did, when I went fur thar feller. Why, he ain't no more a nigger than you air. That's the same detective we was a-chasin' las' night over to the mines," he said, addressing one whom he knew to have been present during the exciting chase after the masquerading Sammy Snag.

A murmur went around.

Pullett retired toward the humble little shanty occupied by the friend with whom he had spent the small remainder of the night.

Here he washed himself, removing the blood, though he could not conceal the livid welts that were upon his face.

"You go over to the mine an' tell George to do the bossin' ter-day," he said to this friend.

"I've got some business on my hands, I have, an' I won't be there."

After that he started off along the road in the same direction as that taken by the disguised detective.

CHAPTER XIV.

A POLICY-WRITER.

BE it admitted for the giant, Jim Pullett, that, despite his coarse ruffianism, wickedness and probable criminal record in the past that lay locked in his own callous heart, he was not a coward.

He was abundantly satisfied that his recent encounter had been with a white man admirably disguised as a negro.

Not believing that the detective had fallen into the pool at the old mine, and feeling that that party was still on a keen hunt around the mines, he naturally concluded that this cart-boy—who had appeared as an intruder in the house of Colonel Belvidere—might be the same person.

He had tried one plan for the annihilation of

the detective; with his gang of roughs at his back, and with the hated sleuth apparently cornered beyond all possibility of escape, he had failed to accomplish the latter's destruction, by some means that still remained a deep mystery to him.

For Frank May, after rescuing the detective from his perilous position, had withdrawn the timely rope and secreted it in a lot of bushes near the spot of the rescue.

He had now determined to hunt out his sly foe single-handed, and have another and far different test of strength with him.

As he made his way over the road toward the pike a mile further up, he drew forth the same peculiar and murderous-looking knife which we have seen him carry between his teeth when making that dangerous ascent of the face of the embankment after the detective above him.

He felt of its keen edge, and a grim look of satisfaction came over his bearded and ugly face as he muttered:

"Sharp enough, I reckon, fer to split the gizzard outen any detective w'ot gits in front of it. An' I'll jest give 'im odds, if he wants it, if he'll let me git a chance at 'im!"

His muddy eyes roved searchingly around as he advanced for some sight or sign of the man he was trailing.

And emerging from a slight fork that formed a green spot in the center of the road—the roads coming together again after a distance of about a hundred feet, into one road again—he saw a man seated at one side, apparently oblivious of his approach.

This individual was rather an odd one.

He was attired in a suit of shabby black clothing; his hat—evidently one of that kind which could be worn as a stiff high hat, or at one thump from the palm, be converted into a low-crowned stiff hat—cocked negligently on one side; the coat buttoned tight from waist to collar-button, and above the collar a rim of white linen that gave him a positively clergymannish appearance. Over his nose he wore a pair of very large spectacles, and through the spectacles a pair of eyes were deeply absorbed upon the page of a wallet-like diary, in which he was figuring with a lead pencil at a great rate.

"Say, you!" Pullett hailed. "Ded you see a nigger come a-gallopin' past this-a-way jest now?"

The man looked up.

"Ah!" he exclaimed, as if in sudden pleasure, and darting forward from his seat on the mossy bank.

"No, my friend, I did not see any negro. I would not have seen you if you had not spoken. I was figuring out a fortune for somebody. Do you want to make a fortune for a few cents? I am the liberal individual to put you in the way of it, I am. I will give you five for one—twenty-five for one—fifty for one—ay, if he has the nerve, he may make six hundred for one. See? Tumble? None of your brash games for me. This is something tony, you bet."

"What's the game?"

Pausing for a glance around, he asked:

"All safe?"

"Safe. Go ahead," and the storekeeper gave a nod to one or two who were standing at the door-sill, gazing in at the stranger.

The man leaned half over the counter and whispered:

"Policy!"

"Oho, that's it."

"Don't give it away too free," the stranger hastened to say, as he noticed the proprietor give another nod to those outside, in answer to which several came shuffling in.

"Oh, it's all right. I guess the boys'll take a hand just for the fun o' the thing."

"They are to be relied on? For you know I'm running a great risk in offering this wonderful chance for a fortune in return for a few cents—"

"Don't let that worry you." And he said, aloud: "Want to make some money, boys?"

"Wal, I dunno," from two or three, who still kept their suspicious eyes on the man in black.

"What's your name?" the storekeeper asked.

"Nick Numbers."

"Gentlemen," introducingly. "This is Mr. Numbers. Make his acquaintance. He's got a game on hand. 'Twon't hurt you. Only a dime or so—an' mebbe you get a fortune. It's on the sly though, so be quiet about it."

"Gents," said Nick Numbers, turning to the others, "I'm going to throw myself onto your good-will and discretion. Would you like to do a little business?"

"W'ots the biz?" asked one.

"The business consists of great returns for small outlay. We are just giving away fortunes to anybody who chooses to step in and grab one. I represent one of the oldest firms in the city of Baltimore, I do, and the money we've paid out to winners in our scheme would just make your head swim to see it. I'll explain. All you have to do is to make a selection of one, two or three, or four numbers, bet what you like on them, play them according to how I book them at your request; and when the drawing comes off, every afternoon, if your numbers win, you get five for one, twenty-five for one, fifty for one, even six hundred for one, as you play them. It's very plain. People who never had more than twenty-five cents in their lives before making our acquaintance, are now set up in business and counted among the rich men in the city—fact! And its costs so little, you know! I'll have a series of the drawings here by mail to-night, and then, all you who have put in a dime, or a quarter, or whatever it may be, will know just what your luck has

been. Oh, it's as fair as fair can be; no humbug at all; if there was anything crooked about it, we'd soon have to shut up shop and stop business, you know. But then, we have a hard time of it; we're fairly driven out of Baltimore; they'll send a fellow 'up' on short notice if he's caught 'booking' anywhere in the State. So keep it dark. Now, how many of you are going to draw a fortune out of the concern where a lot of fools are just aching to hand their money over to you, a fortune for a quarter?"

"Say, does everybody draw luck out o' the thing?" demanded one.

"Oh, I'll be candid with you. As I said, there's no humbug about our shop—not a bit. Of course everybody doesn't draw a fortune. But the chances are that everybody will. Here are the numbers—1 to 78. You can play 'em any way you want. I'll make it plain to you. I've got plenty of time, you know. We wealthy people never expect to have a smooth road to the people," with an air of one who really considers it a great piece of condescension to elucidate the complex conundrum of a fortune for a quarter, and taking from a breast pocket several pasteboard slips on which were the numbers ranging from 1 to 78 inclusive.

These he distributed among the men who stood before him, while he continued:

"Pay attention, and I'll give you the whole racket in a nutshell, so that you can understand it plainly as pork and cabbage." And with a scrape of the throat he proceeded: "Suppose you take a number and bet ten cents on it. Now out of the 78 numbers, there will be thirteen drawn. If your number comes out and you have played it 'stationary,' you get fifty cents. If you bet on two numbers, that is a 'saddle,' and they pay you two dollars and a half; three numbers, a 'gig,' will pay eighteen dollars; four numbers, a 'horse,' will pay sixty dollars. All these chances, gents, on ten cents. Look at the odds in your favor! The successful numbers will be sent to me at this letter-office this evening by mail," in a lower tone. "I can then pay out whatever has been won, you see. I have the money here," he added, as if to inspire confidence, and tapping on his breast, to indicate a pocketful of treasure.

CHAPTER XV.

MAGIC IN A NEW GUISE AMONG THE MINERS.

"RECKON I'll chance the thing once," said one of his auditors, stepping forward, while he dived his hand into his pocket to scrape up the necessary dime.

"Y-a-s, I'm willin' fer to chance a'most anythin' onc't, I am," said another.

"I'm goin' in myself," remarked the storekeeper, more in a spirit of fun than with any idea of winning anything, for he knew the game of old.

"One at a time, gents," requested Nick Numbers, suavely, as he produced his wallet-like diary to make the entries of the numbers selected by the crowd.

"I'm a-playin' a 'gig.' Jest say that thing over ag'in, will ye, 'bout how it works?"

"How much do you play?"

"Wal, a dime, fer a chancer. An' if ye're 'round these yere parts after the fu'st drawin'" with a side wink to his companions, "an' if I draws a fortune, why, I'll go it deeper next time, you bet!"

"A 'gig.' All right. How do you play it? Combination?"

"I reckon so. I don't know nothin' about it."

"Well, you play a combination. That is, four 'gigs.' Two and a half cents on each 'gig.' Now, if either 'gig' comes out, you get one hundred and eighty times the two and a half—making \$4.50. Get the idea, eh?"

"Oh, that's plain enough. Yere's the dime."

"Select your numbers, please—1 to 78."

When he had made his selection, the numbers of which were given to him on a scrap of paper in pencil by the policy writer, the man retired, studying the same as if he was already calculating what he would do with his profits when secured.

The next preferred a "saddle."

After this a "horse" by one of the most venturesome, who remarked, as he stepped aside to make room:

"I want the whole hog or none, I do, an' don't you fellers fergit it!"

"I admire your pluck," said Nick Numbers, smiling patronizingly upon the dupe. "If your four numbers come out as designated, you draw a big pile."

"Thet's what I want."

In a short time Nick Numbers had obtained a patron in every man there; and those who did not happen to have the necessary nickels in their pockets were accommodated by the storekeeper, who seemed rather to enjoy this diversion from the usual lazy atmosphere of the surroundings.

"You'll maybe get some customers over to the mines, about dinner-time," suggested this worthy to the writer of policies, when the momentous diary had been closed.

"Yes; I was thinking of stepping over that way."

The latter ran after him.

"You won't give me away, will you?" he asked, as if a little scared at the way Pullett had treated his explanation of fortunes in store for the investor of a few cents. "You know we fellows have a hard time of it in Maryland now, since the law's been very stringent—"

"Oh, shut up an' leave me alone. I ain't got no time to fool with you nor your cussed plays either. I won't say nothink, so there, now."

After going a short distance, Pullett turned to look back at the singularly loquacious party.

The policy man was standing in the middle of the road, again busy with figuring in his large diary.

When Pullett had disappeared around a bend, this person closed the wallet with a slap and started down the road in the direction whence Pullett had come.

Ten minutes later he had reached the store at the station.

A knot of idlers were congregated variously

He took his departure in the direction of the mines.

And after he had gone, there was a general comparing of slips of paper among the crowd, while the air was filled with talk of "stationaries," "gigs," "saddles," "horses," and the like, as each one, with ideas considerably mixed over the various explanations of the policy writer, attempted to show, according to the way he understood it, exactly what his fortune would be when the result of the drawing in the city came to the locality by the evening's mail.

"Say, you fellers don't want to be makin' so much noise over this thing, now, or you'll be all broke up, first thing you know," the store-keeper advised, coming out to the porch, where the loud voices of the men with the paper slips could be heard as far as the adjoining station.

Then their tones sunk to a mysterious murmur; and as several negro miners appeared to assist at the switch in unloading the carts and piling the ore, the papers were hidden away jealously.

Numbers continued down the road past the station toward Deep Run, never casting a glance behind him.

Before reaching the stream, he was overtaken and passed by a handsome carriage.

In the carriage, handling the reins dexterously, was Colonel Belvidere.

He was on the way to the mine which his vassal, Jim Pullett, bossed. He drove past without a glance at the man in black.

At sight of the colonel, Numbers seemed to have an idea, for he glanced scrutinizingly off toward the hill on the north of the stream, where could be seen looming, almost spectrally, the great stone mansion that was the home of Belvidere.

Then, when the carriage was out of sight, he crossed the log bridge and paused at a short distance on the other side amid a dense growth of trees and brush.

Looking carefully around to see that no one was near, he plunged into the brush, making toward a certain tree.

It was the tree in which we have seen Frank May secrete the mysterious skull after her conversation with the detective.

At the identical tree he paused and stooped to scrutinize its interior. But if he had expected to find anything there, he was disappointed.

The shelf that had supported the skull was now empty.

"Perhaps she has returned herself and taken it away," he muttered. "If so, all right. But I thought I would just step over here and gain possession of it, after giving the aforesaid Belvidere that little warning on the front of his cabinet with the chalk. Of course the girl has it. I must see her and let her know that the colonel is so very anxious about it. She may be able to give me a pointer as to why he is so anxious."

The voice of the speaker was that of our detective, Mark Magic! Well prepared was he when he came to the mines to look up a trail in the Pullett murder case.

While Jim Pullett had been bathing his wounds in the cabin of a friend at the store, Magic was almost similarly engaged at the brink of a spring in the woods not far up the road, washing the black stain from his face and arms with both water and a peculiar solution which he carried for the purpose in his pocket.

The detective it was who now figured so adroitly as a policy writer among the idle miners at the store; and that he had further arranged his plans to perfection with his chief before leaving Baltimore will be shown anon, and the carrying out of the new role he was playing.

A short distance above the spot where he was standing was the shallow crossing for the carts that plied steadily between the mines and the switch, with the cart-boys dangling on the shafts of the carts as they crossed.

He walked briskly to the crossing.

A cart with its driver was just entering the water as he arrived there.

He hailed the boy, causing him to stop.

"Can you give me a little information, my lad?" he asked.

"If it don't take too long to tell it, boss," was the reply.

"Where does the young lady live who is called the belle of the mines? You know her, don't you?"

"You means Miss Frank?" asked the negro lad.

"Yes—Miss Frank May."

"You sees dat clump o' timmer over yander across de fu'st hill by de store mine—de mine w'ot de man keeps as owns de sto'?"

"Yes," as Magic followed his directing finger and saw a plain little weather-boarded cottage nestling amid a small grove.

"Dar's it."

"No mistake?"

"No, sah. You'll fine de Miss Frank dar, I reckons, ef she ain't out a-roamin' roun' de mines, which she allus is, most likely, durin' the day."

Magic slipped a quarter to the lad and hastened onward.

As he reached the top of a small crest, he obtained a glimpse of a mine far below him where the men appeared, from his dizzy height, like so many pygmies, as they wielded their shovels and mattocks, while the mule-carts moved briskly in and out of the mine, dumping the off-cast onto the causeways that were already reaching like immense stretches of roads across the valley toward the stream, to finally turn it from its course, maybe.

One form, even at that altitude, he recognized as that of the dwarf Pullett, who seemed to be doing the bossing.

It was not far from this mine to the home of the belle.

He reached the cottage and rapped on the door.

A small dog set up a howling bark at his appearance.

But there was no response to his summons.

After repeating the sound several times, he boldly entered, for the door appeared to have been left open.

A search revealed that no one was within the house.

The detective was about to leave and look elsewhere for the girl, when his eye was attracted by a strange sight.

He was in the bedroom at the instant.

At one side was a large trunk more like a chest in appearance, and the contents seemed to have been recently rummaged over by a rude hand; the bedclothing was disordered, as if the occupant, on the point of retiring, had been dragged from it, bringing with him or her the clothes in a heap on the floor.

But that which attracted Magic was a note pinned with a firm hold to the cord that was used to raise the curtain at the window.

A piece of paper, on which was writing in pencil.

He loosened it, and read the lines written on it.

As follows:

"Three men are prowling around outside my house as I write this. I recognize one of them to be Jim Pullett. I shall defend myself if he means mischief; and if anything happens to me, look to him for it. It is now just one o'clock in the morning by my clock. I have no time to write more, as I am watching them." FRANK MAY."

As he looked up from the perusal of the paper, his glance, by the merest chance, rested on the upper portion of the door-frame. He saw there a small, round hole.

An examination of this hole revealed a revolver bullet buried in the wood at some depth.

The door was directly opposite the bed.

His theory was that the occupant of the bed had fired at some intruder as the latter entered the door, but aimed too high.

The occupant of the bed could hardly have been any other than Frank May; she had no doubt written the lines at the moment of discovering that some one was prowling about her premises, then retired to simulate sleep and greet the expected marauders with bullets as they came in.

And another idea instantly entered the brain of the detective.

Jim Pullett had brought a mysterious sack to the house of Colonel Belvidere.

What if the sack had contained the form of the girl?

To think with Magic was to act.

He instantly started off by a cut across the hills toward the grim stone mansion on the other side of Deep Run.

His course was through a patch of thick woodland.

As he neared the slant down toward the railroad, he paused.

He heard voices ahead.

One of these—the voice just then uttering some words—he immediately recognized as that of Colonel Belvidere.

"You say Jim hasn't been to the mine this morning?"

"Nary a sign o' him," replied the dwarf Pullett, for he was the second person whom Magic saw standing at a turn in the narrow path ahead.

"Where can he be?"

"That's somethin' I cain't say, colonel. Mebbe he's struck the trail o' the feller w'ot's been prowlin' around these parts spyin' fer detective business."

"Then I hope he will succeed in finding him."

"If he does, his goose's cooked."

"That is one thing that has brought me over to the mines to-day. I want every man in my employ to be on the lookout for a negro cart-boy who is a stranger in the vicinity. When such a one is caught, see to it that his face is washed, and if it turns out that he is a white man—" hesitating for an instant, and then adding: "You know what I want, George Pullett?"

"You want his gullet sliced, I reckon," said Pullett, in the coolest manner possible.

"More than that: I will pay fifty dollars down to the man who can prove to me that he has removed the meddlesome fellow beyond all doubt from the opportunity of spying into my affairs, especially since the affair of last night."

CHAPTER XVI.

ANOTHER DETECTIVE TRAILER.

THE detective glided silently closer to the conversing pair.

"I reckon there'll be a plenty among our crowd—Jim's and mine—as will be ready to claim that fifty, colonel, if we air so lucky as to ketch the cop," Pullett said.

And he asked, almost without a pause:

"Air it true, w'ot Jim says, that we're a-goin' to dig out from here fer Kansas soon? 'Cause I've got enough o' this kind o' drudgin' work. I tell you, colonel, that's too much work fer too little money. Why, look a-thar; when we was out to Kansas, we c'u'd rob a man in one night in the backwoods, an' nobody half the time know w'ot bekem o' him. Like we did that Barnet chap, you know, when we got—"

"Silence, you fool! These very trees may have ears. And you know, as well as I do, that they are looking for the skull of that man now. Once they find the skull it may go hard with the man who killed him. And that involves you and me, too, George Pullett, remember."

Magic saw both cast looks around them, as if fearful that some one might be lurking near.

But the detective was well concealed behind a large tree.

"An' all along we thought Dick Pullett hed that skull into his chest," went on the dwarf.

"It's mighty singular w'ot bekem o' it."

"Not at all. I made a discovery, George."

"A diskivery?"

"Yes. Dick and the girl they call the belle of the mines were married some time ago."

"Sho', now!"

"A fact. Dick had his chest removed to her house. That was why I wanted the chest searched there again last night. Jim knew all about it, though you didn't. I haven't seen much of you lately, and Jim isn't very talkative, you know."

"No; he isn't, that's so."

"Well, we thought the girl must have it. But, furries seize the luck! we haven't got it yet. If I can get it—and I was a fool ever to give it into Dick's keeping—we can destroy it utterly; then, ho! for the West!"

"Ho, fo' the West!" echoed the dwarf.

"I have the girl now safe," pursued the colonel, maliciously, "and I think I can subdue her in a few days. I can make her reveal where the skull is, if Dick gave it to her. I want to marry her, if I can—for she is a buxom and beautiful prize for any man, George—but if I can't accomplish that, why, I'll be content with getting the skull, so that we may be safe when we pull stakes for the old field."

"All right, colonel. If you want anything more o' the like done, jest let me an' Jim know. An' the sooner we're out o' this neighborhood, the better I'll be satisfied, you bet; 'cause I don't edzactly like the way the detectives air a-nosin' round."

"If you see Jim, send him to me."

"I will."

Belvidere wheeled and started briskly down the path.

At the foot of the incline he had his horses hitched to a sapling beside the cart road.

Entering his vehicle, he drove off toward his home.

Magic emerged from behind his shelter and shook his finger after the receding form of Belvidere.

"You're my meat, Colonel Belvidere. You've got that girl in your house, and she was the one you were talking about to your villain assistant last night in the mine. But I think Frank May has been a little too smart for you, in the matter of that mysterious skull. She has it safe somewhere. And now to find her, if she is indeed in your house—"

"Hold on!" said a sudden voice at one side, as Magic was about to hurry from the spot.

He turned and saw a man seated on a log, composedly eating a sandwich and eying him from under shaggy brows.

Evidently this man had been concealed and a listener also to what had transpired between Pullett and the colonel, the former of whom was then descending by a cross-cut to the mine from which he had come to meet the colonel, probably at a signal from the top of the embankment.

The man wore corduroy pants, coat, and a black slouch hat; a shirt of blue flannel; and on his face a beard that was heavy and black.

Magic had been fairly surprised.

But, practiced as he was in the adaptation of disguises, it required but one glance to reveal to him what any casual observer would not have detected.

The man was "made up."

"Hello! my friend, where do you come from?" he asked, advancing and alert for another discovery.

"Come from Bowie Station, last time I started," was the reply, and the eyes in the hairy face twinkled still as they rested upon the Baltimore detective.

"I am traveling for a house that has money to give away to anybody who wants to fleece a set of fools out of fortunes left them by rich uncles in the various lunatic asylums," Magic began to say, producing his policy book and approaching closer with an air of business, "I

would like to explain to you that if you take a chance at a 'stationary' or a 'gig' or a 'saddle' or a 'hors—'"

"Let up," interrupted the other, with a laugh. "Are you on that lay to-day? They told me I would have to hunt pretty smart to find you; but I think I've tumbled to it the first time."

The man laughed as he spoke, and still the eyes twinkled.

"Seen any detectives round here?" he queried.

"Detectives! I hope not. You see, my game—"

"Oh, to thunder with your game. You're

Mark Magic, are you not?"

Magic was somewhat taken aback.

"Who are you, my friend?"

"My name is Slatterly. I'm from Topeka. I've just come out from Baltimore. I was with the marshal of police there for a few hours, and he gave me an idea of about what sort of disguise I would find you in on Saturday. This is Saturday," and as he spoke, the man extended a card which he drew from an inner pocket, on which was the name:

SOL SLATTERLY,
Private Detective,
Topeka, Kan.'

Further attempt at concealment would have been highly inappropriate.

Magic extended his hand, which was warmly grasped.

"What are you doing out here?" he asked.

"Looking for a man, of course. And I think I have found him."

"I am glad to hear it. Who is the man?"

"The one who drove off in that team."

And he asked:

"What is his name, do you know?"

"Colonel Belvidere."

Then Magic rather retired within himself, inquiring:

"You have come a long distance to find the man, Mr. Slatterly?"

"All the way from Topeka, as I tell you. I stopped in Baltimore, introduced myself, exhibited my credentials, and the marshal gave me this, to be shown to Mark Magic if I could find him. I am glad to meet the man—and I believe you must be the man—who has made himself famous in print outside of his own city," and as he spoke, Slatterly handed over a small slip, on which were just three lines besides the signature.

They read as follows:

"MAGIC.—The bearer, Mr. Slatterly, is fully accredited, and is probably working on the same lay, to some extent, in the mines. Make his acquaintance." (Signed) —————

Chief of Police,
"Baltimore,
"Md."

Magic recognized the signature of his chief instantly. He knew that everything was all right.

His first words were:

"Slatterly, your disguise is rather flimsy."

"How?"

"Too much beard, and your eyebrows are painted so as to show."

"I must remedy it."

"Let me do it."

Magic applied himself to remedying what he deemed a "give-way" in the other's disguise, and at its completion presented the pocket mirror which we have seen that he carried, that the Western detective might take a look at himself.

"That is better," admitted the Western detective. "And now, Mr. Magic, let us compare a little. I am informed that you are out here in search of the murderer or murderers of a man recently killed?"

"Yes."

"That may not prove to be so difficult a task for you, since you are conducting operations on the spot of the occurrence. But my work is a little more intricate."

"Let me into it, if there is no objection."

"I am looking for the murderers of a man who was assassinated in Kansas about eleven months ago, and the assassins have been traced by me as far as York, Pennsylvania, thence—though by theory—in this direction."

"Well?"

Magic, though satisfied that the man, Slatterly, was a brother detective, wanted him to "come out" a little before there were any returns of confidences on his own part.

"Well," Slatterly rejoined, "I can give you a better idea of exactly what I am hunting after by showing you this," and he drew a newspaper from an inner pocket, adding: "The marshal rather seemed to think that it would be a good thing for me to find you out here; he hinted that possibly you might stumble upon something of value to me while following your own trail. Read that," pointing to an article in one of the columns of the paper.

It was the Topeka (Kan.) *Clarion*. The item indicated by the Western detective read as follows:

A MYSTERY REVIVED!
SECRET OF A HOLLOW TREE!

THE HEADLESS SKELETON!

A Ghastly Sight as Discovered by Two Old Wood-copers.

Readers of the *Clarion* will recall the mysterious disappearance of one Mellville Barnet, a well-to-do

farmer of — county, several months ago, an account of which was given in detail as far as could be ascertained or theorized by us. Barnet was a widower who lived alone, and gossip said that he had considerable money injudiciously concealed in his large dwelling. Nothing could be learned of his whereabouts; it was finally conceived that he had probably left the locality without caring to say good-by, for his acquaintances were few. Within the past week, however, a ghastly revelation has come to light, which seems to indicate that Barnet was surely murdered, and his assassins were of no ignorant type, but shrewd fellows, to say the least. During a search that was making at the first moment of the excitement over his disappearance, a singular knife was found in a belt of timber near the bank of a creek that wound through his farm. Its blade was larger at the point than at the hilt, having a two-edged taper to the point. The point, however, was missing, and seemed to have been recently broken off. The discovery of this knife on Barnet's farm caused the earlier theory that he had been murdered; but that gave place to the later supposition which has been mentioned. Shortly before the period of the mystery, Barnet had disposed of a portion of his farm to a family of emigrants, who were to come to Kansas, clear the land, build and settle down as tillers of the soil. These arrived two weeks ago. A site for the first house had been selected at or near the very spot where the huge and strangely-shaped knife had been found, and on Thursday of this week two of the men started out with their axes to fell the timber at the stream. And with the fall of the first tree upon which their sharp blades had steadily worked, was verified the saying that

"MURDER WILL COME TO LIGHT!"

"The tree proved to be hollow. Within the hollow was a human body, withered and shriveled almost to a skeleton, and having garments dyed in blood! This body was tightly wedged at the bottom of the great trunk, and for a while it was a mystery how it could have gotten there. An investigation, however, showed another opening high up amid the branches of the now leveled tree, through which the body might have fallen of itself or been dropped by the assassin who sought this means of concealing his dark deed. But the most astounding part of the discovery was, that the body was without a head; only a ghastly, headless trunk lay exposed to their view. At a close examination by many of the near-by citizens among whom the news of the affair spread rapidly, this strangely exhumated corpse was positively identified as that of Mellville Barnet. Another item increased the mystery. Though saturated by blood now hardened and stiff in the atmosphere of time, there was not the slightest trace of a wound on the body. The conclusion was that death was caused by the severance of the head from its trunk. But a member of a private detective firm here, declared that it was his belief the assassin had first struck his victim in the head with the very knife found earlier at the spot, breaking off the point in the skull! Having dropped his dirk in the darkness, and being unable to find it, and knowing that its point was imbedded in the skull, and probably fearing that some one who might know that he carried such a knife would accidentally discover the body, with another knife he had severed the head and made off with it!

"At about the same time as the mystery of Mellville Barnet transpired, a notorious and much feared gang that had occasionally made its raiding appearances from the southwestern portion of the State, was discovered to have utterly left the vicinity; nor have any of the gang been heard of since. Satisfied that the man found was Mellville Barnet, the authorities offered a large reward for the detection of his murderers, and this same detective in pursuance with his theory, has entered upon the almost impossible trail. Nothing has been heard of him since the hour of his departure into the wilderness of woods where it had always been supposed that the gang had their head-quarters. Perhaps he will share the fate of the man whose murderers he is striving to hound down," etc., etc., etc.

Magic refolded the paper and handed it back to the western detective.

CHAPTER XVII.

MARK MAGIC'S MISSTEP.

"You say you struck and followed what you believed to be the trail of the Kansas gang as far as York, Pennsylvania?"

"Yes. I got on the trail while skulking through the fastness of the timber where they really had made their rendezvous. They had gone East. Upon their departure they had left behind an old negress whom they had used as a cook and whose age rendered her unfit for travel. Besides, they did not want to be bothered with her. She begged hard to be allowed to accompany them, for, wild and wicked as they were, there was something in their midst which had completely captivated her old heart."

"What was that?"

"A young and beautiful girl."

"Ah!"

"It seemed that the leader of the gang had a lovely child at that time nearing womanhood. To her the negress was much attached, and the girl begged that she be allowed to go with them. This girl was a daring rider and had been with her father and the men on many of their perilous raids for booty; indeed, she was looked upon as a sort of lieutenant, though at times undeniably exhibiting a spirit at variance with some of the deeds done by her parent and his wild cohorts."

"You certainly picked up a lot of information," remarked Magic.

"Oh, I didn't pick it up; it came straight to me. The old negress became furious and vengeful, when they actually left and deserted her there in the heart of the wilderness, and was

making preparations to depart herself for the homes of civilization at the time I discovered her—though she had no strong hope of surviving the journey. She told me all about it, and by what she had overheard in various conversations between the leader and his men, she was able to hint that the gang was making for the Middle States, and in all probability the mines of Pennsylvania. I assisted her on her tedious way; then I started out in earnest after the gang. There were only four of them, I learned from her, including the leader. This leader, she said, was called Captain Devil-Dash—"

"And the girl—what was she called?" inquired Magic.

"She had no name but 'Queenie' among that rough lot."

And Slatterly continued, concludingly:

"After some difficulty I succeeded, as I believe, in spotting the very gang I was after, up there in the coal regions, where Devil-Dash—though of course under another name—was trying to identify himself somewhat in the coal trade. They disappeared one night, and I almost thought they had given me the slip. But from the ticket agent, I gathered that just such a crew, having a young lady among them, had comprised the only passengers Baltimore bound who had left on that same night, and these had purchased tickets singly, coming at intervals to the station and not giving any sign that they were acquainted with one another. As their proclivities seemed to be in the direction of mines all the time, I am now doing the ore-banks in this section, half-believing that I shall strike them again. Their movements heretofore have been so quick that I had no time to begin any detailed operations for discoveries in connection with them."

Magic smiled beneath his disguising spectacles and laid one hand on Slatterly's knee.

"Old man, your quarry is right here," he said.

Slatterly gazed in some surprise.

"Come with me and I will show you something."

Magic led the other along the narrow path until they reached the brink of the great, pit-like ore mine.

For a moment his eyes, arrested by the sight of indisputable grandeur, roved over the surrounding picture of valleys, streams velvet-green swells and adjacent bush-capped hummocks, with other pits, other mines, where the causeways of cast-off extended like roadways of dusky, blinding yellow, their index-reaching altitudes pointing toward all points of the compass and breathing back the quivering heat of the late morning sun.

Then he pointed down the dizzying height to the floor of the mine beneath, where the men and carts and mules were busily working or moving to and fro like so many Liliputian gnomes.

"You see that mine?" he said, inquiringly.

"Well, yes. And I would not like to take a tumble down there."

"That mine is bossed by one of the men you are looking for."

"You don't mean it!"

"Oh, yes I do."

"But how in the world can you know that?" asked Slatterly, who felt that this brother detective, of whose fame he had heard, would not make so positive an assertion without the best of reason for it.

"You say the gang you are trailing had four men in it? Well, one of those men was murdered. I am after the murderer. I have seen the skull that belongs to the body of the man Mellville Barnet, and I can tell you that you made a pretty correct guess as to the assassin's plan of procedure. Barnet was killed in precisely the manner you theorized—by a knife-thrust in the skull. The gang made off with the skull; it is now in this very vicinity. The one who had it in charge is the one who has been killed by the others, and I know that they did the deed in hopes of finding the skull among their comrade's effects. They had grown afraid of him and resolved to be rid of him and the skull at the same time—"

"Mark Magic, if all this is true, you are making me one of the happiest fellows who ever jumped into a disguise on the shadow brigade!" exclaimed Slatterly, grasping the other's hand.

They retired from the dangerous brink.

Magic gave the western detective some valuable points.

"But you must be on your guard wonderfully, old man," he added, after a brief explanation; an account of his own thrilling experiences in the mining-camp in the character of Sammy Snag, when he ascertained that Slatterly meant to work his way in as a miner.

"I am glad to have met you," he said, further; "for some new items have opened up in my own case, which would seem to demand that I be in two places at the same time—an impossibility. Now I turn over to you the trail of this Pullett and his brother and their gang. I go in another direction. I am spotting a man known as Colonel Belvidere."

"Colonel Belvidere!"

"Yes, one of the rich men of this vicinity. And I believe that Colnel Belvidere is no other

The Head Hunter.

than your quarry, Captain Devil-Dash, of Kansas fame."

Slattery was too delighted to conceal his emotion.

Again he grasped and shook the hand of the Baltimore detective.

A few minutes later they separated; but before parting they fully understood one another.

And from that moment there were two of the shrewdest men in the profession commencing a coil of webbings around the suspected remnant of the Kansas gang—as they both concluded the Pulletts and Belvideres to be—which involved peril, adventure and intricacy.

Magic started briskly and boldly for the great stone mansion on the other side of the stream and above the station.

Arriving at the premises, he perceived the man, Cotton, engaged with the colonel's horses at the stable.

He passed around in order to address himself to the bulldog-visaged fellow.

Cotton looked up from his task of bathing the hock of the horse in hand and scowled suspiciously on the comer.

"Good-day, my friend. Nice weather we're having—"

"Y-a-s," was the sullen interruption.

"Are you too busy to have a little talk—"

"Ain't got no time fer talkin'," came the short interruption a second time, and Cotton continued with his mop and bucket round the horse's limbs, while casting covert glances toward the sleek and spectacled man in black.

Magic drew closer to the fence.

"I've got a good thing on hand, if you're a man who wants to make heaps of money easily," he remarked, in a guarded tone.

"Ye hav', eh?"

"Yes. I'll explain it to you. You see—"

"Oh, git out. We don't want no books nur sewin'-machines nur lightnin'-rods an' sech. I ain't got no time, I tell you."

The man in black drew himself up with a puff of pride.

"I'd have you to understand, sir, that I am not a traveling peddler such as you imagine. I'm the representative of a firm who offers a fortune to every poor man in return for the investment of a dime—only a dime—"

"I ain't got no dime fer to invest, so there. An', durn it! git out, anyhow, or I'll set the dog—"

Cotton was about to threaten the man with setting the dog on him, when he recollects that the animal had been killed on the previous night. The recollection seemed to make him redder in the face with a resurrected anger, and he blurted:

"Go 'long, now. I don't want no foolishness this mornin', I don't, an' I ain't a-goin' fer to have it."

"But, my friend, this firm I speak of pays five for one, twenty-five for one, fifty for one, and, if you are game, you may win six hundred for one. Don't you see? I'm giving you a chance to make a fortune—"

Magic stopped short in the stereotyped speech he had marked out for himself when assuming the character of the policy-writer.

For at that juncture there occurred something significantly startling.

A woman's scream came to the ears of himself and Cotton, its direction being unmistakably the great stone house.

At one leap he had cleared the picket fence.

Before the astonished Cotton could exactly understand what was coming, he received a blow upon the temple that laid him flat on the sward.

Laying hold upon the man by the shoulders, Magic dragged him into the stable. A number of halters were hanging conveniently near on a wooden peg. With these he bound Cotton wrist and limb, and with an adroitness acquired by being in almost similar emergencies before, he had in a trice fashioned a gag by a combination of his handkerchief and a piece of wood that lay by the sill of the door.

The whole operation had hardly consumed two minutes.

Having thus secured the man beyond possibility of his interference at least until another should release him from his predicament, Magic hastened toward the house.

He felt assured that Frank May was a prisoner there.

Perhaps that scream had come from her—she might be in extreme distress at the moment!

He had resolved, instantly upon hearing the outcry, to go to her rescue.

Up the steps and across the broad portico he hurried, entering the house with a boldness that was astonishing to see.

Astonishing it was to Colonel Belvidere, who at that instant appeared at the rear of the hallway on the lower floor, coming toward the front door at quick strides.

"Hello!" he ejaculated, pausing short. "Who are you, sir?"

"Ah! is this Colonel Belvidere?"

"That is my name, sir!"—brusquely. "You seem to be making pretty free about my premises?"

"Oh, no. I tried to summon somebody, but

as nobody came to the door, I took the liberty of entering. I am the traveling correspondent of a Baltimore firm—"

"There is not the slightest possibility that you can transact any business with me, sir," interrupted the colonel, half-forcing his way forward, as if to cause the uninvited guest to back out.

But Magic remained motionless within ten inches of the colonel's swelling breast, and produced his wallet-like diary for the business of policy-writing.

With remarkable suddenness, Belvidere said, altering his tone:

"Ah! perhaps I am mistaken. Step in here, please, and I will hear what it is you have to say," indicating a parlor at one side, while he stepped back to allow his visitor to precede him.

The disguised detective bowed and stepped forward.

It was an unlucky movement, and showed that even the keenest are apt at certain times to be taken off their guard.

Hardly had Magic gained the interior of the room, when he heard Belvidere's voice in a half-suppressed curse in his ears.

And before he could turn he received such a blow behind the ear that he was stunned and knocked headlong to the carpet.

A hard fist had Colonel Belvidere.

A glow of exultation was in his mustached face as he hurriedly stooped and grasped the fallen man by the shoulders—something in the same manner as we have seen Magic serve the man Cotton—and dragged him roughly from the parlor, along the hall to a door behind the staircase, which led to the cellar of the mansion.

"A flimsy disguise, my friend," he muttered, with clinched teeth. "And I guess I can show you that I wasn't raised in the backwoods though I spent some time there. Now, then!" and with the words he dumped the detective down the stairs into the cellar as unceremoniously as if he had been an empty and useless barrel.

CHAPTER XVIII.

BELVIDERE MAKES A DEMAND.

It was rather late in the morning when Etta Belvidere, obeying instructions she had received from her stern father, sought the room where the captive was confined.

She carried thither a tray containing coffee and hot rolls, with tempting butter, and a nice piece of broiled steak.

Entering, she paused to relock the door after her and insert the key in the pocket of her dress.

Frank was sitting at one of the barred windows, engaged with reading from a scrap of newspaper which she had found in one corner of the prison room.

"Good-morning," she said, as Etta came in, and speaking with heartiness. "So you did not forget me, eh? I'm glad of that, for do you know, it isn't often I have to go so late without my breakfast; I am used to being up and fed and out among the mines at an hour soon after the sun shows itself, and often before."

Etta placed the tray on the table, saying, briefly:

"Eat, eat while you have the opportunity. You may not always have it, I fear."

"Is that so? Is the man you call your father really going to starve me now?"

"You must not ask me any more questions."

"But that's natural, you know. It isn't often a young girl gets into such a strange fix as I am in. I want to know all I can. And besides, you being one of my own sex, I thought you might at least be a little talkative, to relieve the short monotony of this trap."

"You say a short monotony?"

"Why, yes. I'll be out of here soon."

Frank spoke with utmost confidence.

"I am afraid you will find yourself very much mistaken," said Etta, in a slow, peculiar way.

"Oh, no, I will not. My friends know just about where I am by this time, don't forget."

The peculiar look on the girl's face became one of puzzlement.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean," replied Frank, as she leisurely seated herself at the table and began eating, "that before this hour there are those who know almost to a certainty where I am, and they will be hunting for me at a pretty sharp rate. Oh, I'll soon be liberated, and my word for it, the colonel, your father, will have a hornets' nest around his ears. I can afford to be in good-humor over the prospect, you see," and she did appear to be entirely without a particle of woeiment regarding herself.

Etta stood near, contemplating this half-wild, free-hearted girl of the mines in a studying manner.

"Why!" suddenly exclaimed Frank, looking up from her repast. "Do you know, if I wanted to, I could get out myself? I really haven't any need to wait for my friends to come after me."

"You are a fast prisoner," returned Etta, decisively.

"Oh, not at all. I could walk out at that

door this minute, if I wanted to. Don't you believe it?"

A derisive smile for an instant curled the lips of the beautiful jailer, as she replied:

"I do not know nor care what has caused such a remark. But I am quite convinced that you never were more mistaken in your whole life."

"You think so?"

"I do."

"But look here: You are a woman, like myself. Would you wish me to be subjected to any sort of torture or indignity at the hands of a man who had made up his mind to act the brute?"

"I have nothing to say in the matter."

But the reader knows that Etta's whole heart was in rebellion at this proceeding on the part of the man she called her father.

Indeed, the colonel had not surmised incorrectly when he had surprised his daughter on the point of leaving the mansion as shown in a previous chapter; Etta was really intending to seek out the girl known as the belle of the mines and warn her of the danger that was lurking and fast closing about her.

Now, however, in the fear which her father's stern nature seemed ever to inspire, and crushed by the signal failure at the start of her magnanimous intention, she was but a passive witness to the strange plot progressing, and had really resolved to do as she had promised: watch carefully over this sun-browned beauty who was to reveal some secret to the colonel even if she could not be persuaded to become his wife or forced into such a contract.

"Would you allow me—youself a woman—to be ill-treated by Colonel Belvidere in this house, without taking any steps to inform my friends of what was transpiring?" Frank asked, in a strangely low voice, and slightly pushing back her chair from the table at which she sat.

"I have no option in the matter. Colonel Belvidere is my father, and he is—"

"Your master, eh?"

"Have it that way if you choose."

"Well, he is not my master. And I am sorry that I cannot find a friend in you. I know he is up to some deviltry. But I don't come of a stock that scares," pushing the chair a little further back, "and, as I said, I could go straight out at that door at this moment if I so desired."

"Could you?"

"I could."

"How would you accomplish it?"

"By taking that key from you."

And as she uttered the words Frank made a remarkable spring from the chair toward Etta—a spring that was almost as fierce as the spring of a tigress.

Her plump and strong arms wound around the girl in such a way that, surprised as she was, her form was bent backward and her head thrown on Frank's shoulder, where both were held by one strong arm, while the other was thrust dexterously into the pocket of the young jailer's dress.

Another instant and Frank released the girl, stepping toward the door, holding the key aloft.

"Just as easy as falling off a log," she said, with a tantalizing smile. "And now, if you choose, you can finish that breakfast yourself. I am going. Ta, ta!"

She inserted the key in the lock and started to leave the room, swinging the door wide.

Then she recoiled.

Directly in her path stood Colonel Belvidere!

On the villain's face was a keenly devilish grin that caused his long-ended mustache to curl up about his nose.

"Going out, eh?" he said, in a mocking way, and stepping inside, while he pushed Frank back further from the door, locked it and placed the key in his pocket.

Then to his daughter:

"It seems that I was just in time, Etta. She was a little too much for you. I am surprised, too, as you are not a mere girl of wax—or else you have forgotten your training out in the West."

"May I depart?" Etta asked.

"No, I want you to remain and hear my little interview with this free girl of the mines," meaningfully.

Perhaps the colonel had an idea that it would be a fair lesson to transpire in the presence of his daughter, in showing her how he dealt with women, after boasting as to how he had "trained" men at a time in the past.

"A word with you, Frank May," he said, turning to his captive.

"Well," composedly, "drive ahead, colonel. I'm listening," the girl rejoined, folding her brown arms and regarding him with a quiet scorn.

"I am a blunt man when it suits my purposes. I shall not waste many words. I am in love with you. Will you marry me?"

"Oh, I guess not."

"I explain: I can give you a great deal of wealth, and in a western home to which I would take you, you can reign, with my daughter Etta, here, as a very queen—"

"I am not particularly aching to become a queen," broke in the girl, derisively.

"You refuse to marry me?"

"That's about the size of it, colonel."

"All right. Now, then, we will talk about something else. Sit down, please."

He adopted a tone that was sharply business-like, while it had a ring of command in it.

His action appeared to indicate that after the few abrupt words implying courtship, he had abandoned that tack and was about to unfold something unusual.

Frank was alert to hear what it could be.

More because of this, she drew forward a chair and seated herself at a few feet distant from him.

A strange expression came into his face; he fixed his eyes burningly upon her.

"You were the wife of Dick Pullett, were you not?"

"Guess you can find that out some other way, if you want to."

"Very well. I will take it for granted. I know that Dick removed to your house to live—
to board, as he said—"

"You must have been pretty well acquainted with him, the way you have his name down pat. Were you with him in the West, when that crime was done?"

"What crime do you mean, girl?"

"Oh, it doesn't matter. Go on with what you have to say."

"Well, Dick was a queer fellow sometimes. He worked for me at a time when I was a gatherer of curiosities. He stole from me an article that I prized highly, and I never could exactly fasten the theft upon him until recently, when I discovered—no matter how—that he did indeed have the stolen article in his possession. Unfortunately, he was killed before I could have him arrested and recover the article; the article is not to be found in the effects of the dead man, though everything was overhauled by the coroner, I believe, who sat upon the body after that body was found in the filled-up shaft. I have reason to believe that Dick Pullett made a confidant of you and gave the article to you. I want it. I must have it. I value it very highly—"

"Wait. What is this you are talking about, Colonel Belvidere?"

"It is a skull—a human skull."

"It is the skull of a man who was murdered in Kansas, is it not?" the girl asked.

"Well, yes, I believe the man was murdered. But how could you know anything about that?"

"Oh, Dick told me all about it—"

"All about it!" exclaimed the colonel, half starting from his seat, while a deeper light came into his sharp eyes.

"That is, he told me I had better keep it, as he feared for his life at the hands of the men he called his brothers, Jim and George, if it should be lost to him."

"Oh, is that all! Well, it is queer what George and Jim Pullett could have to do with it."

"Yes, it is queer. isn't it, now?" and Frank gazed steadily at him in a way that caused him some uneasiness.

"Did he tell you anything more about it?"

"Maybe he did. But then I don't do much thinking."

"Um! Well, I want that skull."

"And is that all you brought me here for, Colonel Belvidere? Is that why you sent your hirelings to kidnap me in the dead of night?"

"Yes."

"Why did you not come to me and ask me for it in another way. For I have the skull safely hidden away, I may tell you."

He laughed in a hard way.

"Do you want me to tell you why I have taken this plan of asking you for that mysterious skull?"

"I would like to know."

"Then, because, if you do not consent to tell me where it is or to give it to me, I shall find a way to make you."

"Indeed?"

"Now, where is it?"

"Where you will never find it, Colonel Belvidere. Where I may one day bring it forth as a silent and terrible witness against the man or men who killed the man in Kansas, and that, perhaps, as soon as I get out of here—"

"But you will never get out of here, Frank May, if you do not disclose to me its hiding-place!"

"We shall see."

But even as the words were upon her lips, Belvidere made a quick and angry spring upon her.

Frank found herself in the powerful grasp of one of his arms, while in the hand of the other arm he held aloft a shining knife, and he glared down upon her with the half-pent fury of a demon resolved on a deed of blood.

CHAPTER XIX.

DIABOLICAL COLONEL BELVIDERE.

FRANK MAY's mode of life had imbued her muscles with a strength beyond the average of her sex, and a spirit that was not to be easily overmastered.

As the colonel made his sudden and fierce attack, she succeeded in hitting him a blow with her clinched fist that was of marvelous force for a girl.

But the sinister-browed man was one of those who possess the sinews of a Hercules within deceiving tissues.

He wound his gripe around her, pinioning her arms helplessly at her sides, and with the sting of the blow in his face, his appearance was more devilish than ever.

"Now, then," he hissed. "One chance—one chance I give you. Give up the skull, or by Hades! I shall strike this knife straight into your heart, and thus will perish yourself and no doubt the only person knowing where the skull is—"

"You lie when you say that even as a thought!" burst from the vainly struggling girl. "Another than myself knows where to find the silent witness that shall one day blast you, Colonel Belvidere. Ha, ha! you are not as shrewd as you thought."

Blacker and blacker grew the scowl of vengefulness on his face as she thus defied him.

Etta turned away her head and glanced out at the window with a shudderful expression in her face.

"My father will surely make good his threat," she thought, "for I know his bold, wicked character but too well. Let me not see the terrible blow that is to deprive this poor girl of her life."

The colonel was in dead earnest.

"I do not believe you, Frank May. Once more I say, give me the skull, or reveal its hiding place, or you die!"

Then, as she maintained a stubborn silence, he gripped the gleaming weapon tighter and seemed for an instant to concentrate additional strength in his arm for the downward stroke.

"Curse your obstinacy!" he breathed, with baleful breath. "Then you shall have the fate you invite on yourself. Die!—"

Frank saw that the blade was about to be buried in her breast.

Notwithstanding her wonderful nerve and strong spirit, she could not suppress the cry that rose to her lips in the face of this awful death.

One loud, ringing shriek broke from her, wafting out at the window.

Simultaneously, Etta turned, crying:

"Father! Hold! Do not strike! Danger—danger is at hand!"

The upraised arm was stayed.

He sprung to his daughter's side to glance out at the window.

Both were witnesses to the act of the detective who had leaped the picket fence upon hearing the sound of distress.

Belvidere's eyes now fairly blazed.

Before another cry could escape Frank's lips, he had seized her in a hold of furious power and bore her toward the door, hissing forth to Etta:

"Open the way—quick! There is no time to lose!"

Pressing the struggling form close to his broad breast until she was half smothered and rendered incapable of giving any further call for succor, he hastened down the stairs.

Etta lingered at the head of the stairs until he had passed out of her sight, then, with a heavy sigh, the girl sought her own room.

Belvidere made haste to the closet-like door, that opened into the cellar at the rear of the last flight of stairs terminating in the lower hall.

Workmen had recently been engaged there in cementing the walls and floor of the cellar, and had orders to prepare a new series of steps for the descent.

It chanced that at this time there was only an ordinary step-ladder affording access to the cellar.

Down the step-ladder the colonel bore his struggling captive.

Reaching the ground floor, and pausing for a single instant on the still fresh cement, he dropped his burden, and with a bound that showed him to be a man of considerable suppleness, reascended the ladder to the door, which he shut and locked with a ponderous key.

It was at that very instant that the detective entered the hallway, coming from the direction of the front door.

At first the colonel was disposed to treat the intruder with a high hand; but he recovered himself and acted upon the knowledge which he believed he possessed, that the comer was no other than the detective in the neighborhood who had once before boldly entered his house.

He controlled his passion of the previous moment, and extended the invitation which we have seen resulted in Mark Magic being completely deceived and eventually powerless in the clutches of the very man he was bent upon shadowing.

Though partially stunned by the terrible blow dealt him by the colonel from behind, the detective still had enough life remaining in him to strive to break as much as possible the abrupt fall down the step-ladder to which he was summarily subjected.

Belvidere hastened immediately from the house.

He went toward the stables.

"Cotton! Cotton!" he called. "Where are you? Here, Cotton!"

There was no response to the call, for the very good reason that Cotton, though fully recovered from the blow he had received from the active

detective, was powerless to move hand or limb or utter a sound to attract assistance.

Belvidere strode on, and as there came no reply to his calls, he grew more angry.

"Cotton, you hound, where are you? I want you at once. Cotton, I say! Hi, Cotton!"

He crossed the threshold of the stable and paused short.

Then, as he looked down upon the tightly-bound man, he remembered the scene he had paused for a second to witness from the window in the upper story.

"By all the furies! So that man overmastered you, did he?"

"Wal, he did, you can bet!" returned Cotton, with a mighty oath, when the colonel had released him from his predicament.

"Do you know who he was, Cotton?"

"Wal, no. But he's got a purty cute way o' knockin' people out o' time, I'm ready fer to swear."

"That man is a detective, Cotton."

"No!"

"That is just what he is. Now, who knows, Cotton, but what he is looking 'round here for a man who escaped from the Maryland Penitentiary a short time ago—"

"Let up, colonel. You said you wasn't a-goin' ever to refer to that there thing after I kem inter your employ, you did."

"Neither do I intend to, Cotton. But I only wanted to show you that you were in great danger from such a man."

"Wal, I reckon I know that. Say"—suddenly—"whar is the cuss at now. I'd like fer to see him try that same thing on onc't more, I would. Durn me ef I wouldn't show him somethin'."

"The 'cuss,' as you call him, is all right. I met him in the hall at the house, whither he had come, no doubt to find out what that cry meant just now. Did you hear the cry, Cotton?"

"Yes, I heerd it. It war jest es the cry come 'at the feller bounced over the fence an' git me a lick behind the mug 'at laid me sprawlin'."

"Well, I met him in the hall, Cotton. And I do not think that he will be so able to enter a man's house in that sort of style again in a hurry."

And as Cotton gazed at his employer in silent inquiry, Belvidere continued, with a devilish exultation that he could not conceal:

"I laid him out in his own turn. He is now my prisoner."

"Good fer you, colonel," commented Cotton, with another of his peculiar fiery oaths.

"Now," Belvidere pursued, "what to do with him?"

"Knock 'im in the head!"

"Would you be glad to know that such a fellow was completely out of the way, Cotton?"

"Wal, I jest would!"

"That's right. You are a man I can take a liking to. We won't be always trammed by the too much detailed laws of this utterly civilized section, Cotton; and when I make a move for a new field where a man like yourself can have room to spread, I mean to take you along with me. So you decide that we must get rid of the man who is undoubtedly a detective, eh?"

"That thar's my desire. Shell I go an' do the biz? Whar's he at? Show 'im to me. Gimme a chance at 'im! No, I cain't afford fer to hev no detectives a-foolin' round whar I'm at—"

"Easy," intercepted the owner of the mansion, as Cotton made a motion as if he would start forthwith to strangle or otherwise kill the man declared to be a detective.

For be it known that the State authorities had been looking for this very man, Cotton, who had by some means escaped from the penitentiary. And when he entered the employ of the colonel, he had only done so to raise enough money to carry him far enough from the state to make him a little safer. He had found Belvidere a man for whom it was rather a pleasure for one of his caliber to work, and had remained longer at the great stone house than he had at first intended.

He knew that the detectives were probably after him.

That one should be now so very close alarmed him. That that one should now be in the clutches of his employer, who, he was shrewd enough to detect, had a reason for himself to dread the presence of an officer of the law, afforded him a chance that he would not willingly let go by.

"I have a better plan than that of strangling or otherwise marking the body of the man you are so anxious to kill, Cotton," Belvidere said:

"Wal, go ahead, colonel. You're boss round yere. Wot air we to do with 'im? Jest say the word."

"You have no compunctions about getting rid of him, eh?"

"Don't know edzactly wot you air a-sayin', but ef you mean do I want to see 'im dead es a rat, you air right, I do."

"Dead as a rat—ha! ha! ha!—that's it—a drowned rat," and the colonel laughed with a strange, sibilant hardness.

"Come with me, Cotton."

With the colonel in front, the two villains entered the house.

Belvidere led the way to the top of the building.

Crossing by a sort of connecting platform, the colonel paused on the standing rim that surrounded an immense tank raised on trestles.

The height of this tank, above the upper floor of the building, would give the flow of water from it considerable force; it had been erected upon the colonel's first occupancy of the house, to serve in case of fire, as well as to furnish the inmates with a plentiful supply of rain-water.

Through the halls below were arranged a series of rubber hose of heavy make, with intervals of pipe hose, the nozzles of which would concentrate the force of the water descending so as to cast a fair stream.

Belvidere pointed to the great tank.

"There will be the means of destroying the man you have cause to fear, Cotton."

Cotton thought that the colonel also had some deep motive for fear of the man; but he held silence.

"Now, if you are ready to act, we will soon get rid of him without having to sully our hands with contact of his body."

"Go ahead an' give yer orders."

Turning, Belvidere regained the house again, and obeying his instructions, Cotton brought together the various sections of hose that were arranged along the entries.

One end of the great length of rubber piping was fastened by its turn-buckle to the spigoted spout of the tank. The other was lowered out at the entry window to Cotton who had descended at the other's command to receive it.

A few minutes later the nozzle of the hose was inserted into a small window of about two feet in width and ten inches in height, which formed the ventilator for the cellar.

"Are you ready down there?" called the voice of the malicious colonel from above.

"All ready. Let 'er go!" responded Cotton.

Then there was a sound of descending water; through the hose poured a torrent that seemed irresistible as the colonel turned on the cock of the spigot at the tank.

He hurried to join his hireling on the outside of the house.

"Is the feller down cellar?" Cotton asked, for the first beginning to understand the diabolical plot of his grim employer.

"Yes, he is down there. And there is enough water in the tank to fill the cellar to the brim! But hasten to the door that leads to the cellar and draw up the ladder there, so that he will not have a perch to rest upon, while I engage his attention in this direction. Listen to the water!" and he bent to listen to the rush of the torrent through the hose, expecting to hear some outcry for mercy from his intended victims.

CHAPTER XX.

DOOMED TO DROWN LIKE RATS.

THOUGH striving to endure his rough fall with as little injury to himself as possible, Magic did not reach the foot of the step-ladder on the cemented floor without a jar that shook every bone and muscle in his frame and for a second time nearly deprived him of consciousness.

Gathering himself up as soon as possible, he saw that the door above had been shut and fastened on the opposite side.

The colonel had not lingered to see whether the man suspected of being a detective was dead outright or not.

He was too full of the diabolical idea which had immediately entered his fertile and villainous brain at the moment of consigning the man to the cellar.

Through the small ventilator a dull portion of light entered, giving but a faint idea of the actual surroundings.

As he started to half grope forward, Magic was arrested by a voice that was both musical and grave.

"So, this Colonel Belvidere has found another victim, I see."

It was the voice of a woman; and Magic felt a strange thrill as he instantly recognized it to be that of the girl Frank May.

He called, at once:

"Is that Frank May who speaks?"

He spoke in his natural voice; and the girl recognized him in turn, for she said:

"Ah, how could you have come here," at the same time advancing from the far corner of the cellar, whither she had retreated at the sound of some one about to enter the place of her imprisonment.

They came together and mechanically grasped hands.

"I was looking for you," he said.

"Why, how could you guess that I was here?"

"I found the note you pinned to the curtain-cord at your cabin, and it was easy to decide where you were, after I had heard this man, Belvidere, plotting with his arch-assistant, Pullett, for the delivery to him of some girl."

"I thought Pullett had come to kill me," said Frank. "I saw them skulking around the house. I went to bed with my clothes on, and with my revolver under my pillow, after placing that note where you say you found it. I hardly know why I did that, for I had often before seen men prowling around my cabin. I think I must have been half asleep, notwithstanding my resolution

to remain awake and watch, when I was aroused by hearing a stealthy step outside of my bedroom door, and in another moment the giant form of Pullett appeared there dimly outlined against the starry night visible through the entry window-pane. I fired without even pausing to address him; but the darkness caused my aim to go amiss. After that I cannot recollect much, except that I felt myself in the great scoundrel's arms, and something—a drug of some kind—was forced against my mouth and nostrils by another man who came into the room, and I think the last was George Pullett."

"Colonel Belvidere wanted to get you into his power," Magic said, inquiringly.

"Yes, evidently."

"Do you know what for?"

"At first I was puzzled to know what Colonel Belvidere could want with a girl such as I am—the wealthy Colonel Belvidere," she added, with an accent that contained a latent sneer. "But I soon had an explanation of it. He wanted to marry me."

"Indeed?"

"But bless you! he wasn't so particular about that after all, for when I flatly told him that I wasn't marrying just about now, he dropped the subject altogether and showed his hand on another tack."

"What then?" questioned the detective, who had by this time entirely recovered his complacency.

"It is not the Pulletts, as I had at first supposed, who wanted to secure that mysterious skull I showed to you."

"Colonel Belvidere is the man to whom that skull is more valuable than any other. Though perhaps all are interested in it, since you say you heard the colonel plotting with Pullett to make a captive of me."

"Yes, I heard that plot. And it was because of it that I instantly knew where to look for you when I found the note on the curtain cord. The colonel, you say, was particularly anxious to have you give up the skull?"

A peculiar smile came over the girl's face.

"So anxious, that if some one had not attracted the attention of the wretch at the moment I screamed, I would now be dead."

"Dead!"

"He was about to drive a dagger into my heart."

Magic gazed the astonishment he felt.

"Is this man so bad as that," he said, half-musically.

Frank May went on to describe the thrilling scene which had transpired in the upper room and the providential interruption which ensued upon her involuntary outcry of terror.

"It was I who caused the diversion," Magic said. "I was spying around and at the time talking with one of the rogue employees of this man, when I heard the scream. I leaped the fence made a prisoner of the stabler and hastened to the house," and he described the neat trick by which he had himself been entrapped.

"They saw you," Frank declared, "from that window. At the moment you entered the house the colonel was preparing some means to bring you into this very fix."

Her last remark recalled Magic to the disagreeable situation of himself and the girl.

He began to cast about him in a survey. There existed no doubt in his mind that he would be able to extricate both himself and his girl ally from the cemented cellar, though at first inspection of the place, he was forced to realize that it would be no easy matter, after trying the massive door at the top of the improvised steps and measuring with his eyes the narrow ventilator. As he moved hither and thither, he said:

"There can be no doubt that this Colonel Belvidere and the Pullett brothers are closely allied in more pieces of villainy than any one in this neighborhood can suspect. I may tell you in confidence that I think the colonel, as well as the Pulletts, will be 'pulled' very shortly. I have a strong ground for suspecting that the colonel himself killed your husband."

"Ah, what ground?"

"Because he is so anxious to gain possession of the skull."

"So are the Pulletts, I think."

"And the Pulletts and the colonel are, so to speak, one. Besides, there is a mystery in regard to the skull which perhaps you may not entirely know, even if Dick Pullett did give you some of his confidence."

"I learned enough from him to know that it is the skull of a man who was murdered in Kansas, that for some reason the murderers wished to carry the skull of the murdered man so far from the scene of the deed that there would be no likelihood of its ever being found. I know that a knife like the knife I have seen in the hand of Jim Pullett at the time he was climbing after you on the face of the old mine, must have caused the wound in the skull which I showed to you when we first consulted together. Yet I do not think that Pullett killed my husband, after this experience with Colonel Belvidere. I believe he is the man who did the deed in Kansas, though he may have used Jim's knife—"

"The knife, my girl, with which the man was

killed in Kansas, is now in that State in the possession of the authorities."

"All the more reason to suspect Jim Pullett, then, because the fact of his having such a knife shows that he has a particular penchant for that kind of weapon."

"We shall investigate the knife carried by Jim Pullett," Magic said, with a peculiar inflection.

"We?" repeated the girl, querulously.

"Yes, for there is a Western detective now in these parts in search of a Kansas outlaw, known there as Captain Devil-Dash, and he and I are working on the supposition that Devil-Dash and Belvidere may be one and the same— But, my girl," as a sudden thought struck him, "where is the skull now?"

"It is safe."

"You have it beyond doubt?"

"Yes."

"You did not leave it in the tree, then."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that I have looked in the aperture of the tree this very day, and it is not there. Of course, you have found another hiding-place for it—"

"No, I have not," interrupted she, in some trepidation. "I left the skull where you saw me place it. If it is not there, then some one has found and made off with it."

Magic could not conceal his vexation at this announcement.

He had settled down to what was, in his mind, the trail of a skull, that was to involve strange revelations and a larger case than the mere discovery of the murderer of Dick Pullett, upon which he had been started by the insurance company.

Here was a most unfortunate break in the trail.

The skull, to him, had become a part and parcel of his strange adventures, since there was attached to it so much of mystery which he had gleaned for himself since landing among the mines, and through the account in the Western newspaper furnished by his accidental meeting with Slatterly.

He was about to comment upon this unfortunate loss, when their attention was attracted by a movement of some one on the outside of the narrow, ventilating hole.

As both maintained silence, and fixed their gaze on the hole, an object, which they saw was the end of an enormous piece of hose, was thrust through.

A voice hallooed on the outside:

"Let 'er go!"

Then through the hose and into the cellar rushed a stream of deluging water that dashed against the opposite wall with almost frightful force and filled the astonished pair with spray.

For a second it was astonishment alone that held them motionless, gazing in a nameless fascination on the in-rushing water. Then—and it required no words to tell the thoughts of each—their gaze met in a sort of pallid horror.

The full realization of their peril, of the fiendishness of their enemy, forced itself upon them.

The cellar was not large; the strong cement on wall and floor was proof against the insinuating eddies that began to curve against the corners, increasing in depth at a wonderful rapidity.

No egress could the water have there; if the source of the flood continued, there was no hope for the imprisoned pair; they must drown miserably and helplessly.

With his pocket-knife—with his revolver-butt—picking and pounding alternately, Magic endeavored to make a hole at different points in the floor of cement; but in vain, until, wearied with his rapid and almost superhuman exertion, he started to his feet, for the first time in his life losing some of his famous self-control.

"We are doomed!" he groaned.

"No," rejoined the girl, coolly, though the water was even then creeping up above her ankles. "See! We can mount the stairs and be beyond the level of the top of the cellar. The water then will run off through that window—Ha! merciful Heaven! The ladder—the ladder! Quick! Seize it, or we are lost indeed!"

Magic caught at her inspiration and was already bounding toward the step-ladder, while Frank made a similar movement.

The ladder was slowly but surely rising beyond their reach!

As they came to the spot where it had rested on the floor, it was just disappearing over the edge of the doorsill above.

The bull-dog face of Cotton glared down on them with a diabolical grin, as he laughed gutturally and cried:

"Ho, ho! cuss yer, I reckon yer'll drown like rats, won't yer, my fine detective! Thet's fer the lick ye gi' me back to the stable. Ye cain't live long. Thar's water enough inter the tank ter drown a dozen people in a cellar like that there! Oh, you're a goner, fer sure!"

In his fiendish delight at the prospect of thus destroying the detective, and Frank May being further behind Magic, in the gloomy bottom of the cellar, he did not see the girl.

The door slammed shut and they heard the bolts being shoved forward into their massive sockets.

The water was now above their ankles.

Still the torrent came rushing through the ponderous hose.

Magic sprung to the open end of the dangling pipe and tried by pressing above it to stay the flow. Frank lent him all the aid of her own by no means weak hands.

But the effort was useless. Still the water rushed and gurgled around them, climbing higher and higher, twirling its cold eddies around their forms.

Then they stood and gazed once more into one another's eyes, a mingled expression of blank despair and resignation settling in hard lines in every lineament.

CHAPTER XXI.

A GHOST FOR COLONEL BELVIDERE.

VAINLY the mustached villain on the outside of the ventilator hole listened for some outcry from his victims. He fancied that he heard their voices, but the rush of the water rendered the sound incoherent.

Cotton rejoined him presently.

"He'll soon be done for," the colonel said.

"Wal, I reckon. Now, that there war a cute idee o' yourn, anyhow, I swear. It'll save a heap o' trouble. An' am I fer to bury the cuss when we fishes 'im out?"

"Yes, Cotton, I leave that to you."

"Oh, I'm willin' enough, I am."

"Do you hear anything?" Belvidere asked of his hireling, and bending closer to the ventilator.

He was careful, however, not to expose his person on a range with the hole, as he apprehended that the drowning detective, with a last desperate effort, would shoot him with the probable weapons he carried, and which, in the haste to consign him to his intended watery grave, had been overlooked.

"Don't hear nothink 'cept the water. I think it's a-gittin' deeper," he added, as the rush of the water now gave forth a gurgling, bubbling sound, indicating that the end of the hose might be emitting its stream under the surface.

Suddenly another sound came to their ears. More water was falling somewhere; a heavy plashing was distinctly heard coming from around the near corner of the house and probably under the tank that was now spurting its deluge into the cemented cellar.

Belvidere hastened around the angle. Instantly he called, in some excitement:

"Cotton! The tank's sprung a leak! Quick! up there with you and see what can be the matter. It is strange, for the tank is new and never has been used in this way before. Haste!"

Cotton shuffled off.

Ascending to the roof, he clambered out onto the platform and bent to examine the sluice at its junction with the spigot.

From this a stream of water was escaping even larger than that being forced through the hose.

And much to Cotton's surprise, the leak was occasioned by the utter absence of the cock of the spigot!

He looked around for the essential piece, but it was not to be seen on the platform.

"Hullo, down there, colonel?"

"Well, have you fixed it?"

"Ther durned stop-cock's outer the thing. Do yer see it down round thur anywheres?"

Belvidere uttered a curse, as, coming too close to the falling water, he received a copious ducking.

"It is not down here!" he cried, impatiently. "Find it up there and get it in, quick—"

"But 'tain't up yere at all," responded Cotton, looking around him again in vain for the missing cock.

Another curse from the lips of Belvidere, as his eyes caught sight of the huge brass thing lying at some distance away from the trestle-work supporting the tank.

He sprung forward and grasped it up; then, without waiting to summon Cotton to take it, bounded into the house, making for the reservoir at full speed.

The scoundrel feared that by the loss of too much water, there would not remain enough in the tank to accomplish his murderous purpose regarding the detective and the girl.

A labor of a few minutes sufficed to restore the cock to the spigot and regulate the flow all right again.

But Cotton shook his shaggy head in a peculiar way.

"What's the matter?" demanded Belvidere, rising from the task with garments saturated.

"It 'pears rather singular, colonel, 'at the thing shed 'a' shot out and dropped 'way over there," said the burly ruffian. "It war a brand new concern, I know, an' everything war fast enough 'ith the screw underneath when we left yere. 'Sides, it must 'a' took a mighty queer turn inter the air to git over whar I saw you pick it up, anyhow."

"Why?"

"Wal, it was onter t'other side o' the tank, cl'ar. I'd be thinkin' if it fell out or shot out, it would 'a' more likely 'a' fell right down thar," and he pointed downward.

Cotton evidently had an idea that the stop-cock had actually been removed by some one—and that some one could have been no other than Etta, the colonel's daughter.

He did not venture to express this suspicion, however, after the colonel said, in a manner to settle the doubt:

"There is no accounting for the curving course of things blown out of a boiler or out of a stop-cock like this. A very strange but still not unnatural position for it, I admit. Come."

As they descended the staircase, Belvidere said:

"Watch below until you see the water coming out at the ventilating hole, Cotton. Then you may turn off the water—if any is left in the tank after filling up the cellar—and let matters remain thus for half an hour. There is not room between the lower sill of the little window and the flooring to permit of a human being long sustaining life there. And if the fellow should gain a hold upon the sill, all you have to do is to beat him back, you know."

"Oh, I reckon I understand all that. I'll be on ther lookout fer the cuss, never you mind."

Cotton took up a position near the ventilator. He saw the colonel proceed to the stable and take out one of the horses, harnessing the animal himself into a single-seat buggy.

Then Belvidere drove off in the direction of the mines, at a brisk rate.

Cotton had not long to wait for the filling up of the cemented cellar. The water in the tank was equal to the occasion, with much to spare. Cotton retired once more to the roof to turn off the spigot when the muddy liquid began pouring through the little window onto the sward.

"Ha'f a nour, the colonel said," he muttered, as he descended again and went toward the stable where there was a large hand-pump that had done good service in that same cellar before the wealthy colonel had the underground place thoroughly cemented, in order that it might contain vegetables, butter and other articles of food. "Ha'f a nour's too long a time fer me to wait fer a peek at thet thar detective. I reckon he'll be dead enough b' time I git ther pump rigged onter the sill," with which he brought forward the monstrous tin tube, drew a pail of water from the pump to start him, and went to work with a will.

Once he paused at his laborious exercise to peer down through the hole into the cellar, now gloomier than ever with its fullness of water.

Not the slightest sound was audible within; like the death it compassed seemed the dully-glistening depth of silence.

And again, after a few strokes that sent the water spurting from the mouth of the hand-pump, he paused as a voice sounded close to his elbow.

"You's done fo'got all 'bout yo' dinnah, isn't you, Mars'r Cotton, sah?"

An old negress, the colonel's cook, was standing there.

"Oh, git out an' never mind about thet jest now, Dinah. I don't want no dinner terday, I don't. An' you jest keep round 'bout yer own kitchen, will yer? You ain't no business—"

"Yah-hm! I's on'y a-askin' fo' yo' good, sah, Mars'r Cotton."

"There, now, that there'll do. Git—git!" Left wholly to himself, he applied his muscle stoutly to the task of relieving the cellar of its flood. But pumping out a cellar is by no means as speedy an operation as

that of filling it with water, especially where there is not even a rat hole to assist the worker by an additional drainage.

It was late in the afternoon when, having reduced the depth to about eighteen inches, Cotton procured a candle, tied it to a string and cautiously lowered it, by means of a pole, over the edge of the ventilator and extended it inward.

He moved the light around over the surface of the water, lying flat on his stomach and grunting anon with the strain.

The flickering ray revealed nothing of the dead body he expected to see there.

Only the further corner, near where the steps had been, was without the pale of the small flame.

And he exclaimed at last, starting up:

"Cuss 'im! I reckon he's dead enough, so ther ain't nothink fer to be skeerd of, an' I'll take a peek down from the door."

Entering the house, he went to the door and opened it. Again the candle was lowered, but with the same result as before: there was no dead body to be seen.

Then, half mad, he seized a cudgel that stood behind the front door, lowered the step-ladder and boldly descended, trampling and plashing around in the water, holding the candle above his head with one hand and clutching the cudgel for a blow with the other.

Then a blank expression came over Cotton's brute face.

Not a being besides himself, living or dead, was in that cellar. And the door had been found by him as fast as when he had left it after taking away the ladder.

"Wal, durn my hidel!" he burst forth. "Where kin he have got ter, anyhow? An' yere I've been a-pumpin' 'ith thet durn pump all this time fer nothink!"

Utterly bewildered, he hurried out of the cellar and out of the house.

As he reached the lawn he saw the colonel coming furiously in at the gate, the horse in a foam and his own face of a deadly whiteness.

Colonel Belvidere had had a remarkable experience after leaving his mansion.

He wanted to see his right-bower, Jim Pullett, to communicate to him what he deemed an extraordinary piece of good luck, in having so easily destroyed the man who, in the capacity of a detective, was lurking in the vicinity, causing them, for numerous reasons, to feel very unsafe.

Mixed with this mood, however, was a regret that he had not been successful in forcing from the girl, Frank May, a confession of the hiding-place of the mysterious skull.

"No matter," he finally consoled himself with muttering. "I do not believe that the girl spoke the truth at all when she said that another than she knew where the skull was; it was an artifice to frighten me off after I had threatened to kill her for her obstinacy. She alone, probably, knew where it was; she has secreted it cunningly somewhere. And perhaps it is as well buried as if Pullett or I had obtained possession of it and utterly destroyed it in crumbs. I am breathing freer since I know that by this time the accursed hound of the law is surely drowned."

In this mood he reached the mines.

George Pullett was still "bossing" the teams and the shovelers, and prodding on the tired mattock-wielders.

Jim Pullett was not in the mine.

At a sign from the colonel, George Pullett came forward to answer his employer's inquiries.

Jim had not been in the mine all day, Belvidere was informed. Nor could any one give any information as to his whereabouts.

Satisfied that he was not there, and that he had not been at all among the mud cabins during the day, Belvidere drove off again by another road, pursuing a course toward the store.

The time occupied in going to the mines, by the devious ways necessary for a carriage unable to withstand the rough ruts of the wagon-roads, and by another and equally tiresome course back to the store, was nearly two hours.

When he reached the store, he was met by the smiling proprietor, who came forth to salute the wealthy Belvidere, and ask if there was not something he wished to purchase.

Belvidere had opened his mouth to give some order for a lot of provisions to be sent up to the mansion, when he stopped, threw back his head, and with suddenly blanched face stared at a personage who just then came from the door of the house adjoining the store.

The expression of his countenance was that of a man who gazes point-blank upon a ghost!

And no wonder—for the man was Mark Magic, still in his disguise as Nick Numbers, the policy-writer!

There could hardly be any mistake about it either, for there were the evidences of a recent copious ducking in his garments, which hung wet and flaccid round his limbs.

Magic, with his wallet-diary in his hand, and spectacled eyes fixed upon a page of mysterious numbers—for he had purchased a new pair of spectacles at the store after his marvelous escape from the cellar—did not appear to notice the colonel at all, devoting himself to a low dialogue with a loitering miner who engaged his attention immediately upon his appearance.

CHAPTER XXII.

THE GOOD DEED OF A GIRL.

"WHAT's the matter, colonel? Are you sick?" asked the storekeeper, noticing at once the singular pallor of Belvidere.

The question seemed to break the stupefied spell into which the astounded man had relapsed.

Without any answer, and with face still blanched, Belvidere gave his horse a terrible cut with the whip and went whizzing away from the store along the road.

"Not dead? Not dead?" he burst forth, in a tone of exclaiming inquiry and staring ahead over the horse's ears.

Then in another and different outburst:

"By the furies! What can have happened at the house? How in the name of Hades could the fellow have escaped? Is there treachery here? Did Cotton discover that there was a young woman in the cellar and play traitor to me rather than destroy her? If he has done so, I shall shoot him through the heart!"

Again and again he plied the stinging whip to the horse's sweaty hide, urging the beast until it was almost going at a race-horse speed.

Suddenly, at the temporary forking of the road into two roads for a short distance, at that spot before mentioned in the course of our story, he came upon a man.

This man was Jim Pullett.

The giant was coming on at a swinging pace, with half-hung head, scowling brow and a glance in his muddy eyes that might remind one of a dog on the point of displaying the rabies.

The colonel reined in his horse.

"Where have you been all day?" he demanded.

"On the tramp," was answered, rather surlily.

"What ails your face?" as he noticed the livid welts that still maintained a sore prominence on the ruffian's face.

Observing the other's glance at his signs of recent punishment, Jim said, with an oath:

"You see these yere beauty spots?"

"Well?"

"I've been a-lookin' fer the man w'ot did that there, ever since this mornin', an' if I ked on'y 'a' ketched 'im, I'd 'a' broke 'is cussed backbone into bits, or I'm a liar, I am."

"How did it happen? What were you fighting about?"

"It wa' a cart-whip dool, colonel. I'll tell you 'bout it," and Jim proceeded, with many an interjection of wrath on his late antagonist, to relate the scene in front of the store, in which he had been the unlucky participant.

"He jest slashed me fur all I was wu'th, colonel, an' nigh belted the head off o' my body fur to wind up with; then skedaddled, a-leavin' me chawin' the dust an' stones. Oh, he weren't no slouch. An' the wu'st of it air, he weren't no more'n 'bout es high es my shoulders, at that—cuss an' durn 'im!" Jim concluded, with a tigerish light in his eyes.

"I've been a-trampin' the whole kentry fur 'bout four miles squar' all day, a-lookin' fur 'im. But I reckon he's gi' me the slip," he added, with a brutish manner of regret.

"A negro it was you say?"

"A black feller, I se'd. But he weren't no more a nigger 'n I am, colonel. Weren't no longer nur shorter'n the 'dientical cart-boy feller wo't you se'd war spyin' roun' your house las' night."

"Ha! the detective!"

"Wal, you an' me supposes it must be a detective."

"You have been looking too far from the spot of your encounter with him, Jim."

"What d'yer mean?"

"The man you have been after has been all this time very close at hand and continuing his game of spy."

"No, now!"

"It's true. Why, he has even been back again to my house; Cotton had an encounter with him—"

"An' did Cotton kill the cuss?" demanded Jim, interruptingly, and with some expectancy that the detective had been "done for."

"To the contrary, he laid Cotton out flat."

Jim smote his thigh in angry disappointment but said nothing.

"But you might have looked the week through for your cart-boy, Jim," the colonel pursued.

"Why?"

"Simply because he has done away with that disguise. He is now altogether a different personage."

"You've see'd 'm?"

"Yes—"

"W'ot does the cuss look like now?" interrogated the giant, impatiently, while the tigerish light in his eyes increased.

"He is dressed in black, wears spectacles and a high hat—"

"W'ot!" fairly roared Pullett. "You don't mean it?"

"I do."

"An' thar I—durn blast me!—I've been a torkin' to the galoot at 'bout this yere very spot, I have, an' didn't rec'gnize 'im at all. Whare's he at? Tell me! Let me git at 'im! Oh, jest set me onter 'is heels to oncen! Whar is 'e?"

"You will find him down at the store near the station at this very minute, I think. Go for him, Jim. Don't let him escape you this time. Get the whole crowd of miners on him if you can't manage him yourself. He must be got rid of, Jim!"

"Jest wait till you hears from me ag'in," and Jim, without saying more, and clinching his ponderous fists in anticipation of once more facing the hated detective, started at a loping run toward the station.

Belvidere whipped up his horse again.

At a high rate of speed he reached his own gate and drove in just as the astonished Cotton was emerging at the front of the building after his fruitless search in the cellar for the body of the detective who was supposed to have been effectually drowned there.

"Colonel!" he began to say, hastening forward at a trot.

"Cotton, you traitor, what does this mean?"

"W'ot does w'ot mean?" asked the man, in turn, as he saw that his employer was fearfully enraged.

"I left you to attend to the man whom we drowned in the cellar, didn't I?"

"You did."

"Well, where is he?"

Belvidere's eyes blazed now, and he reached significantly toward his hip pocket for a weapon which he always carried there.

He had really meant his murderous threat against the life of the man, in the first moment of his belief that he had been treacherously dealt with.

Cotton was too old in worldly fields of peril to misunderstand this movement.

"Hold on thar," he said, quickly. "What air you up to, colonel? You ain't no need to 'draw' onto me."

"Tell me, then, if you can, what this means. I have seen, within half an hour, the very man we had safely drowning in the cellar. There can be no mistake about it. He has escaped in some way, and I look to you for an explanation."

"All the explanation I kin give, air that I don't know no more about it'n you do, an' that's fer a fact. I worked onter the cussed tin pump tell my arms was nigh pegged out, an' then I got a candle an' peeked inter the cellar. I didn't see nobody. Then I took a club an' went down inter the cellar, an' still

I didn't see nobody. Air you sure 'at you hed a man down there?" he interrogated, as if he doubted whether there had been any detective at all in the cellar, though he had seen the man with his own eyes at the time of drawing up the ladder.

"You know there was a man down there."

"Wal, mebbe I did. But all I've got ter say is this yere: I foun' the door fast enough when I went fer to go down thar, but nary man was in the water, an' you hear me shoutin'."

Belvidere could but confess to himself that Cotton's earnestness was enough to carry conviction with it.

By some remarkable means their intended victim had escaped from the cellar and the horrible fate of drowning.

How?

A sudden idea struck the colonel. A strange look came over his face. He exclaimed in a way that Cotton could not exactly fathom:

"If I thought such a thing could really be true, I would strangle her."

"Strangle who, colonel?"

"No matter. Come with me. I will look into this. I half suspect who it was that liberated the man from the cellar."

"Wal, I'd like fer to know that myself."

He followed his employer into the house, while the horse and buggy were left standing neglectedly.

Straight to the room of his daughter went Belvidere.

"Etta?" he called, pausing impatiently on the outside of the door and knocking sharply.

Then, as there was no response, he forced his way in—to find an empty apartment.

On the table lay a note which his roving glance immediately perceived.

He took it up and saw that it was addressed to himself.

Tearing the missive open, he read, with flaming eyes:

"COLONEL BELVIDERE:—I do not call you father longer, because my soul has revolted so far that I do not consider you entitled to a continuance of the term. I have been for too long a pliant witness to and assistant in your wickednesses, and have at last resolved to leave you forever, if Heaven will permit me to find a haven where I shall be free from your flagitious influence. I have taken with me certain papers which for a long while have been a mystery to me—I having noticed them in your cabinet on the first day of our coming here. You will rem'ber what papers I mean, perhaps, when I say that they are tied with red ribbon and sealed with red wax. I have not the time to read them now; I will look at them when I have gained a place where I may be safe from your vengeful pursuit, which I know will be immediately inaugurated by you. Before I go, I do at least one act of goodness, to perhaps balance some of the gross acts I have been guilty of at your relentless commands in the years past. The time has come for me to throw off the terror in which I have been held by you; I liberate, as I go, the unfortunate beings in the cellar. I tell you this so that you may not wrongfully blame your hired tool and ruffian, Jack Cotton. It was I who took out the stop cock from the spigot in the tank; while Cotton was trying to stop the leak, I opened the way for your prisoners to escape. Perhaps, after al', it would be better for you to leave me to my course; for I swear to you that I shall place myself near the arm of the law, and at the first sign of danger to myself from you, I shall reveal all our past life in the West." ETTA."

A curse of rage that fairly made the hardened brute, Cotton, start and stare, burst from Belvidere's lips as he finished the perusal of the missive, which he saw had been penciled in the haste of a sudden flight—probably within the minute after releasing the detective and Frank May from the deepening pool.

He turned and rushed toward his library.

Swinging open the closed doors, he dived his hand into a drawer which he had always supposed to be safely secret.

"Gone!" he exclaimed. "She has indeed gotten them. Well, curse her, let her go, then! She is mistaken—I shall not pursue. I only regret that the term of my vengeance has been thus cut short by an exhibition of spirit which I never dreamed she could summon in the face of my own stern will. Let her go."

"So the leetle gal did the business?" ventured Cotton, who had picked up the note which fell from the colonel's hand and read it without a protest from Belvidere.

Cotton could not help adding a short expression of admiration for the girl's pluck.

It drew another and angry oath from Belvidere, who said:

"I am going to the West, Cotton. Are you anxious to go along?"

"Why, I've jest been achin' fer to git out

o' this part o' the kentry fer a spell, colonel. You sound the bugle an' I'm a-hossback in no time, I am."

"Very well, we shall go to-morrow night. We might as well have all the money we can scrape at the start, though, and besides, we must act out a plan of business to the last. Go over to farmer Gibbs and ask him if he is prepared to renew his offer for my horses which he made some time ago. The silly fool wants them for his daughter who has just got back from the seminary and wants to cut a swell in Washington this winter."

When Cotton had departed, the colonel brought from a store-room in the top story, one at a time, a lot of small, iron-hooped chests, arranging them in a row in the library. Then he began to work on the contents of the cabinet, transferring many bundles of papers, and the ore in the drawers, to the chests, until they became nearly full. On the top of this packing, he next proceeded to lay various articles of clothing.

Evidently, Lucius Belvidere meant to make himself scarce!

CHAPTER XXIII.

THE POLICY-WRITER ON HAND.

ETTA it was who had furnished the seemingly doomed pair in the flooded cellar with a means of escape when all hope seemed to have departed from their hearts.

Nearly neck-high the water was, as the two stood staring vacantly at the increasing eddies around them and felt the cold line climbing higher and higher.

The strong detective had resigned himself to the death which was now creeping relentlessly upon him at last, after having emerged through countless perils in the past that might have appeared as hopeless as this.

Frank was even the calmer of the two; her great blue eyes watched the climbing water, and though her beautiful face was very pale, there were lines of setness around her sweetly curved lips that showed her to possess a remarkable nerve.

"We can but die, sir," she whispered, and it was her only speech in that lapse of awful moments. "I only regret that I could not have lived to avenge Dick. I am not afraid to die."

"Nor am I," said Magic, suppressedly. "But this is indeed an awful death. God receive our souls, my girl! For there can be no chance for us now— Ha!"

"This way!" called a voice that seemed accented with the sepulchral tenor of a ghost within a deep tomb.

The sound was in the direction of the stairless door.

"Hasten, if you wish to live. You have not a moment to spare!"

"Saved!" burst from Magic, in pardonable joy.

They moved as rapidly as they could through the water, which was now almost at their chins.

Reaching a position below the door, they could see the girl, Etta, standing there. She was paying out a rope consisting of double twisted clothes line.

Its end soon touched the water before them.

"Climb! Climb for your lives! And be quick, or the opportunity may be past!"

Frank May, with some slight assistance from the detective, was first to ascend, a feat which she accomplished with more agility than might have been expected on the part of a female. But Frank had had many experiences in climbing among the dangerous shafts of the mines. That experience served her well now, because it expedited their movements.

When Magic had followed, they paused for an instant, at Etta's wise suggestion, to wring as much as possible of the water from their garments on the small landing-like shelf at the inner side of the door.

Then, with but little dripping over the carpet in the hallway, which was at once absorbed and scarcely left any sign of a trail, they were led to the door by Etta and urged to make all haste away by the woodland at the side of the mansion.

With a fervent "God bless you!" from the delivered pair, Etta returned to her room and wrote the note which was afterward found by the enraged colonel.

A few minutes later, and while Cotton and his employer were on the roof, Etta also left

the house, fleeing toward the station where she knew a train would soon pass bound for the city.

From a covert, Magic and the belle of the mines saw Colonel Belvidere presently come driving along.

"Can he be the father of such a girl?" Frank asked, half aloud, and more as if putting the question to herself.

"I very much doubt that," Magic said. "Belvidere is all that is coarsely villainous; this girl seems to have goodness in her heart, though in constant contact with him. Yet you say that she was acting your jailer with the most positive earnestness?"

"I can think that perhaps she was even then under the eye of the man, and afraid to act otherwise," Frank declared, as if loth to believe that the lovely girl could be willingly wicked.

"Come. He is gone. Let us get on the other side of the stream. I want to help you take another search for the skull. It may be that I was too hurried when I went to look for it this morning."

Crossing Deep Run, they made their way to the clump of timber with its thick growth of bush, where Frank had secreted the skull.

True, it was gone from the shelf.

At first she was disposed to utter again that expression of regret which escaped her when first learning that Magic had been to the tree and found that it was missing.

Suddenly, however, she stooped.

At the base of the aperture was an accumulation of leaves, whisked in there probably throughout many a fall blast, and forming quite a pile.

The next instant she uttered a glad cry, and drew forth the skull from underneath the heap.

"It is safe—look!"

"I am glad of that. But how could it have been knocked down?"

George Pullett had not attained his point of eavesdropping upon the detective and the girl, as in a former chapter, in time to perceive that Frank had placed a skull in the cavity of the tree. And in the excitement attending his novel capture by the detective, he had still failed to see the strange thing above his head on the improvised shelf.

When liberated by the chance passing negro lad, Pullett had started on that mad run to denounce his enemy among the miners, and still did not see the skull for which he and his brother and Belvidere were exerting themselves in an extraordinary manner. The jar occasioned by his liberation, as he bounded forth from the cavity, had caused the skull to roll from the shelf into the pile of leaves at the base.

The negro lad, forgetting about the presence of the skull, and now that it had disappeared, also took to his heels, in a partial state of fright at all that had transpired, and wondering at his own pluck in going to the relief of a person so singularly imprisoned, and seemingly guarded by a semblance of a death's head.

As Frank brought forward the ghastly thing, she half paused as something seemed to cause a rattling sound within it.

"What is it?" Magic inquired.

"There is something inside of this—probably a pebble."

"I do not think it is a pebble," he said, taking and turning over the skull in his hands, causing a repetition of the sound.

"What do you think it is?"

He pointed to the singular incision in the top of the skull.

"When this wound was delivered upon the head of the living owner of the skull, the knife that entered here was broken at the point; the broken piece remained in the bone. The portions of the skull have evidently shrunk away from the immediate spot of the wound, through the various influences of exposure, permitting the piece of steel to become loosened. The recent fall of the skull from the shelf has accomplished the rest, knocking it entirely free. Within the skull will now be found, I am sure, the point of the knife that killed a man named Mellville Barnet, in Kansas, and which knife is now in possession of the authorities there."

Magic related to her the incident of his meeting with the other detective, Slatterly.

Slatterly is now among the miners, assuming a similarly dangerous role to the one that got me into trouble in the first place. I

gave him points of warning, however, which may enable him to pull through all right. He is watching for an opportunity to investigate the knife business—I mean, as to whether Jim Pullett really carries such a knife as you say you have seen in his gripe—"

"I did see it," asserted she. "It would, as I have told you, make just such a wound as this; and such a wound as this is like the wound on the head of my husband, Dick, though everybody thought it must have been made with a mattock edge."

"Slatterly and I mean to examine the head of Dick Pullett, when we have once seen the mysterious knife in Pullett's possession. I have confidence in the western detective, Frank. I expect to hear from him soon and favorably. Meantime, I would advise that you go back among the miners and be ready to render him any assistance which he might need in an unlooked-for emergency—as it occurred with me, you know. I have spoke to him about you; as soon as he sees you he will find a way to make himself known to you."

"Oh, I guess I shall discover him before he has a chance to learn who I am," half-laughed the girl. "I have keener eyes than some think."

Magic had had evidence that this shrewd and brave girl was indeed keen of discernment, as in his own case when assuming the role of Sammy Snag.

"It would be better to find a more secure hiding-place for the skull," he suggested.

"My very thought—yes," she replied. "I will take it to a spot where I am sure no one ever goes."

"I must be off, then, now. It is growing near dark. The evening train will soon be along from the city, and I have some rather interesting business to transact in keeping with my present disguise. My clothing ought to be changed; but I have no time for that—"

"One word," interrupted Frank, grasping his hand.

"Well?"

"Though we both came very near meeting our death together, I still cannot feel otherwise than that to you, to a great extent, I owe the fact that I am a living girl at this minute. You will accept my heartfelt thanks?"

"Oh, yes, of course," returning her warm pressure. "But don't mention it, please. There, now, I'm off. Good-by."

He turned and left her standing there, holding the skull before her and watching after him.

Crossing again the familiar log bridge, he pursued his way rapidly toward the store on the opposite side of the railroad.

In ten minutes the train from Baltimore was due.

He observed a throng of idlers gathered near the station doorway, evidently watching for the arrival of the train.

Some of these waved a salutation to him as he passed, and one called out:

"Thar he goes. We'll soon know who's a-top o' the heap, now."

Two or three miners were in front of the store, but the majority were over at the station platform, buzzing and murmuring in a mysterious manner that caused the ticket-agent much curiosity. It was seldom that so many men congregated there without announcing their intention to leave for the city or elsewhere; and in response to his inquiry, as the time for the train drew near, they informed him that no tickets were wanted.

"Say," the storekeeper remarked to Nick Numbers, as that important personage made his appearance. "I reckon you'd better go over there an' see the boys about standin' round the office that-a-way. They are bound to talk, you know, and if the agent found out that any policy-playin' was afoot here, he'd be just the one to get you into a hobble afore it's over with," and he winked knowingly.

"I wish a drink of water," said Magic.

"Then I will go over and see about it."

He entered the building at the side of the store and having refreshed himself with a glass of freshly drawn spring water emerged again to the front.

"Hed a duckin', didn't ye, somewhar?" inquired a miner of him, as he appeared.

It was the party who at once engaged Magic as he came out, and at the moment

when Colonel Belvidere was pausing with his team in the road before the store.

Magic at once perceived the look half of horror and half of astonishment which swept over the colonel's face at sight of the man he surely supposed to be dead ere that moment.

While regarding Belvidere covertly, he was saying to the man:

"My friend, won't you go over and say to those men for me, that if they hang around the station, I assuredly will not go there to get the mail I am expecting. I cannot afford to jeopardize myself and my business by any such foolishness, and I want to work the country round here for awhile yet. Bring them over here; then, when the train comes in, I will get the returns and bring them here to distribute any prizes that may have been won."

He recognized in the fellow one who had "chanced" a dime on a "saddle" in the policy list.

This party returned a knowing nod and started to do as he was requested. And as he went, he muttered to himself:

"The chap's right 'bout that. W'ot'air the boys a-makin' such fools o' theirselves over ther' fer. It'll maybe break up the goggle-eyed cuss in black at his biz."

The warning of the engine whistle was just then heard about a mile around the bend in the track.

Magic cast a careless look off along the road leading away from the station. He saw a towering form approaching.

He instantly recognized, though at considerable distance, that this new arrival was to be Jim Pullett. And Pullett seemed to be in a wonderfully great hurry, throwing out his long legs at a half-run as he approached.

CHAPTER XXIV.

SOME "POLICY" LUCK.

THE conversation which had occurred between Colonel Belvidere and Jim Pullett had not consumed more than a minute and a half at utmost, and Jim's immediate haste to get into the vicinity of the disguised detective had soon brought him to view around a turn of the road, though still at some distance from the store.

Magic did not believe that Pullett was aware of his disguise, though he might have surmised it if he had known that to reach the road leading to the stone mansion Colonel Belvidere was forced to pursue a route that would have taken him past the coming man, when, probably, he had communicated briefly what had transpired at his house and given a description of the man in black who had escaped from the flooded cellar.

The detective did not really wish to encounter Pullett at that particular time; he wished first to install himself thoroughly in the confidence of the miners by what he knew was about to occur through an arrangement between himself and his chief in the city of Baltimore.

He turned carelessly and re-entered the building, stepping once more into the side room where the water-bucket was set.

He heard the miners coming over from the station, led by the persuasion of the man he had sent to accomplish this.

Then the train came in; there was a delay for alighting passengers, the gong sounded, and the cars rumbled away.

"Whar's the cuss in spectacles?" demanded one of the foremost investors in the policy numbers.

"Just stepped inside—I seen him," answered one of the group who had remained at the porch in the first place.

Magic took a cautious peep between the curtains at the front window. He did not see anything of Pullett.

Stepping outside among the men, he looked off along the road and saw that Pullett had turned aside or gone past. He was not in sight.

Immediately at sight of the policy-writer, several jerked out their slips of paper and flourished them on high.

"Yere!—yere you air! W'ot's the news, now?"

"Y-a-s, who's a-walkin' off 'ith that there fortin, say?"

"Give us the p'ints, old goggles!"

"How about my gig?"

"W'ot do I git fer me 'hoss'?" demanded the one who had entered the racket "whole hog or none," in his own words.

"Now, my excited friends," said Magic, as quietly as possible amid the din of half a dozen voices, shouting at once, "just hold up for a few minutes. The news isn't all in yet—that is, I haven't been over after the mail yet. Be at peace. I have no doubt that a great many of you will be building brown-stone houses for yourselves before the week is out—"

"Go on after that mail!" interrupted the one who had purchased a combination for a horse.'

"Y-a-s, never min' the chin music!"

"Fo'nd out 'bout my 'gig'."

"An' my 'saddle'."

"An' my 'flat'!"

"Now my friends—" Magic began to say again, with a queer gravity and vainly striving to entirely hide the smile that came around the corners of his mouth.

But there was no talking to the crowd. They wanted instant and detailed business. Some had lost a whole day's work in anticipation of drawing a handsome prize out of the lottery in the evening; their tin kettles remained under the bench on the store porch where they had been deposited after investing the mystic dime in the more mystical numbers.

"Shet up!" howled one. "Go on after the mail!"

"Oh, I'm waitin fer my millyun dollars, I am!" bellowed another. "I ain't got no time to stan' roun' foolin' when the carpenters is a-waitin' fer me to give orders to build a hotel!"

"Y-a-s, an' I want to get started onto that spree an' bu'st the whole town wide open inter red streaks, I do."

"Go on after that mail—that m-a-i-l!" yelled the stentor throat of the "whole hog-or-none" miner.

"All right, gents, here I go now—"

"An' herry yup, old man," cried some one after him, as he started toward the mail office at the station.

Yes, there was a letter for Nick Numbers, marked transient.

A long, official-looking document tightly sealed.

He hastened on his return to the store with this, waving it aloft as he came, as a sort of harbinger of coming good luck for somebody in the anxious crowd.

The action brought a cheer from the suspensive miners.

"Now, you must wait, really you must—"

"Don't want no waitin' 'bout it! Bu'st the durn thing open an' let's see w'ot we've got."

"Gents, I shall insist that you will allow me to wait on you one at a time in turn. Come by turns, and we shall get through with the business much quicker. There is no need of such a hurry. Why, I have attended to a score of men more than are here in less than five minutes. But there must be system—system, gents."

"Yes, fall back there," here put in the whole-hog-or-none man. "I reckon the cuss knows his business better'n we do. I'll see 'at everybody hes a fair shake, don't yer fergit." And he added, stepping formidably to the front: "An' I'm the fu'st man. Whar's my winnin's onter the 'hoss'?"

Magic, at a beckoning from the storekeeper, passed inside to a door that opened into the adjoining building. Here he stationed himself, while he opened the precious missive in the presence of several who insisted on pressing forward.

Within the envelope was a once-folded piece of yellow paper.

Unfolding this, there was revealed a series of numbers arranged something like the figures on a tablet calendar, in square rulings.

"One at a time, gents. Now, Mister Man—you who took a 'hoss'—come and look over the thing and see for yourself whether your numbers came out in any of the combinations."

The "whole hog" shuffled forward with a side wink at one of his companions, and saying to Nick Numbers, as he laid a greasy hold on one corner of the sheet:

"Don't git mad an' go ter yellin' ef I bu'st the hull durn firm outen all their capital, now, mind!"

"Oh, I won't cry a bit. I haven't any particular sympathy with them, you know. I'm only working on a salary, that's all."

The "whole-hog" turned the paper right

and left and upside down, scanning the figures hungrily and comparing them with his slip of paper anon.

"Say!" he exclaimed.

"Well?"

"I don't see ther durned *comby*-nation at all, anyway you kin turn 'er."

"Is that so? Let me see your paper—no, I believe you have drawn a blank."

Without another word the "whole-hog" passed through the doorway and skulked out at the rear exit.

Next came the "saddle" man; then the "gig" man; then some of the "flats" (all flats, for that matter!).

In turn they passed out after the "whole hog" man with sweet dreams exploded into thin air thinner than the vapor of a whisky fume!

But two there were who gave a yell of delight. Two of the "flats" played numbers and won. Magic promptly handed out their value—five for one—and the miners who had received fifty cents for their dime departed in tolerable high glee at having at least drawn something where their more ambitious companions had failed.

In thus pursuing practically the outline of a character he had determined to assume before going into the mines, Magic had not incurred any very great pecuniary risk, even with the fact that his drawing there at the country-store was not a "bootleg" drawing.

A "bootleg" affair is where the policy-writers return their books to the real backers of the game and then these latter arrange the drawing to suit themselves.

There were but four or five "flat" or "stationary" numbers taken, and in these alone had the detective any idea of being called upon to pay winnings, and these, with the player only having twelve chances in seventy-eight for success—there being but twelve of the seventy-eight numbers drawn—were not likely to become formidable.

In the playing under the slang of "gigs," "saddles," "horses" and the like, the chance *against* the player is increased to such an extent—though the dealers apparently offer him big odds—that it would appear almost impossible to calculate it.

Magic was congratulating himself, that if he had not made an altogether happy lot of miners there, he had at least fixed his character pretty well upon their minds and safely.

He thanked the storekeeper for his assistance and stepped out to the porch.

As he appeared there was a murmur among those who had come around to the front after their crestfallen departure by the rear exit.

A score of faces were turned frowningly upon him.

He saw that some trouble was brewing.

"Gents," he said, "you must not blame me that you did not, all of you, secure prizes out of this afternoon's drawing. Of course I had nothing to do with it, and you must be aware that I could not even have forwarded, in that short time—with no mail from here to the city until late this afternoon—a list of the numbers that you had taken. Oh, there couldn't possibly be anything crooked about it, I assure you. You weren't in luck this time, that's all."

But the murmur grew louder.

The storekeeper leaned and whispered:

"Say, it isn't altogether safe to trust that set, anyhow, after they've got such a set back. Why, I've heard the man who took a 'horse' say, this afternoon, that if he didn't draw a prize he'd be durned if he didn't find out where the head-quarters was an' clean out the whole thing with his boot—an' he'd commence on you. My advice to you is to go off among some other mines; there's plenty of room over the hills yonder, where you won't come in contact with this set. Besides, nearly half of 'em belong to the Pullett gang, they do. A hard crowd, I tell you—"

The speech was now drowned in an increased murmur that seemed to be taking a definite form of words.

And these words were directed to or aimed at the disguised detective.

"A durn cheat, the hull thing," one declared.

"Bah!"

"The sleek cuss hes jest got inter the crowd fer over five dollars, I reckon."

Then above the murmur, some one shouted, angrily:

"Toss him inter the run!"

"Y-a-s, that's ther ticket!"

Three or four of the foremost stepped toward the man in black as if they meant to seize him.

"Hold on there, you fellers! Not so fast. I'm a-bossin' this job, I guess," here rose a deep and hoarse voice from the outer circle.

The crowd swayed back into two sections.

In the space thus made stood the giant, Jim Pullett. His arms were folded across his great chest, his muddy eyes were burning ominously, and his gaze, fixed and baleful, was upon the man in black.

Magic realized that Pullett had started the angry feeling.

Had the burly scoundrel read through his disguise or been informed of it, he asked himself.

"Who are you, my friend?" the pseudo policy-writer asked, returning the staring gaze coolly.

"You don't know me, hey?"

"Oh, no, I guess I never saw you before—"

"Thet's a lie, an' a whopper!"

And Pullett added, scowling till his shaggy brows met in a twisted knot:

"Jim Pullett's my name. I've got some business with you."

"Let it right out then, my friend. But don't be too fresh about the way you talk to me, or maybe I'll have to give you a thumping to teach you some manners."

"Wot's thet?" roared the bully.

And several of the miners bent their lank bodies to gape in astonishment that any one should have the temerity to thus address the terror of the Ann Arundel mines.

Pullett stepped forward to within three paces of the man in black, and his orbs seemed about to start from their sockets. His huge arms were permitted to dangle at his sides, and the crowd saw that his sledge-hammer fists were slowly clinching.

CHAPTER XXV.

MARK MAGIC AS A FIGHTER.

MEANING looks were exchanged among the assembled miners. They scented one of those diversions for which Jim Pullett had made himself famous since coming among them.

A fight was imminent.

As if by common concert, they began to form a semicircle before the giant and the short-statured man in black, with the store porch for a background.

"Look here, my Shanghai friend," Magic said, composedly, but with a dangerous flash in his eyes, "what business is it of yours if these gents choose to invest a dime or so in a legitimate game of chance?—for I suppose that's what you're making this fuss about. It was a perfectly square thing, as such things go, and if they were not lucky enough to win a million or so, you haven't any cause to be putting your mouth in, that I can see."

"Air you done?" asked Jim, in a strangely intense way.

"Done?—how?"

"Spoutin'."

"Oh, I don't go much on the spout, particularly when I'm talking to such lank-legged specimens as you. What do you want with me, anyhow?"

The giant did not intend to follow the colonel's advice to set the miners on a man whom he knew they were one and all prejudiced against if found to be a detective. He had still confidence in his own prodigious strength and prowess to overcome the adroit-fisted sleuth if at all aware of the character of the latter, which he now was after, his several experiences with him.

He was acting a wary part now, and at the same time striving to bring about an encounter in a seemingly natural manner.

It was not his intention to let the detective suspect that his true character was known.

"You air a furst class fraud, my spectaled dodger," he said, throwing his shaggy head back slightly, and opening his eyes the wider at the motion, "an' I ain't a-goin' fer to stan' by an' see any sech as you come around where I'm the boss, fer to swindle my pards outer their dimes nur anythink else. You hear me?"

"Oh, but I didn't swindle them at all."

"You hears 'im," remarked Jim, turning

partially toward the others. "Ded he swindle you or ded he not—say?"

"Y-a-s—y-a-s!" came from several.

"Now you hev it," again to Nick Numbers. "They says 'at you hev swindled them, you have, an' they're sort o' afraid o' you, I reckon, or they'd be takin' back their money from you 'ithout my interferen'—"

"Oh, no, I guess they wouldn't."

"An' I says they would."

"And I say they, nor you either, wouldn't do anything of the kind, my operatic church steeple."

"An' I says you're a li—"

Before Pullett could complete the sentence, the bystanders saw a man spinning round like a top on one leg, then a great burly form went to the ground in a heap, as if struck by a shaft of lightning.

Magic had knocked the bully squarely off his feet at one scientific rap with his knuckles.

So astonishingly rapid had been the motion of the blow, that the onlookers were in doubt as to whether the man in black had really done the thing. For Magic stood there as firm and as composed as if nothing had happened, surveying the fallen giant.

Pullett slowly and carefully regained his feet.

"Thet settles it," some of the nearest heard him mutter—though they did not surmise that the remark was intended purposely for their ears.

He cast a glance toward the spot where the man in black had stood, to see whether he had fled after his exhibition of boxing prowess.

The quiet man in black was still there.

"You ain't a-goin' fer to be backed down, air you, Jim?" demanded one of his own followers.

"Jest keep your mouth. I'm attendin' to this."

With which he proceeded, with great deliberation, to take off his hat, which he dropped scrupulously in the road at his feet. After the hat the ragged coat followed. Then the sleeves of the blue flannel shirt were slowly rolled up in a way that fully displayed what an abundant muscle the man really had.

His great arms were fairly knotting with cords and muscular wrinkles; his fists, as he doubled them two or three times, as if to see whether his gripe was sufficiently elastic, were like two round gnarled tree roots, over which the coarse hair grew black amid the grime of the mines.

Pullett was acting in a way entirely different from what others had seen in him on occasions of a brawl, many of which had been participated in by this giant bully. His manner was singularly quiet; only the muddy eyes betokened that a terrible passion was waging within his stalwart breast.

He slowly advanced to within a few feet of the man in black.

"Now, my cussed smart friend," he said, nodding, "you air to pitch right in an' try that thing once more—pitch in," he added, in a little higher key, as if to emphasize the remark.

"You are determined to force a fight on me, are you?" asked Nick Numbers, while the others marveled at his coolness.

"You heerd me, I guess. Pitch right in," and the ponderous arms began sawing the air in a way that said:

"Ef you ain't in a durned hurry about it, I'll begin the leetle racket meself by knockin' you sky high!"

"All right, my friend, you shall have your fill," said the detective.

"Say, take off your specs," howled somebody in the crowd.

Nick Numbers removed his spectacles quickly. Then he buttoned his black frock coat tighter up in the throat.

"Roll up yer sleeves," suggested another from the crowd, nudging the man nearest to him in a meaning way that said:

"Jest watch Jim put a head on 'im!"

"Oh, I do not think I need roll up any sleeves," was the smiling reply from the man in black.

Pullett, while he was sawing the air and giving an exhibition of his muscle to the admiring circle, still regarded his prospective adversary warily.

The quiet manner, the confident carriage, the easy indifference as to whether he fought

or not, seemed to impress the bully still further that he had no common antagonist to deal with.

Magic handed his hat to the storekeeper.

"Please hold that, my friend, until I am through with this big baby," he said.

"Oh, I'm a baby, am I?" exclaimed Pullett, showing the first sign of passion as a titter went around behind him.

Then the detective—who had thoroughly measured his man and knew exactly how to deal with him—stepped closer, keeping his arms akimbo and saying:

"Go ahead with your mashing mill, shang-hai!"

Pullett did not tarry from the fight.

With all the suddenness that was possible for a form as huge as his, he lurched himself forward, expecting to take his adversary unawares, and struck out with his sledge-hammer fist.

In that instant Magic read in the demoniac expression of the giant's features that he was known, and this programme was but a part played to possibly compass his destruction.

And in Pullett's mind at the moment there was but the one thought of then and there making his opportunity to annihilate the hated detective.

As the ponderous right arm shot out, it struck to kill!

But Magic was not there. Not that time.

By the slightest of motions, he eased himself to one side on one foot, while the other foot remained where it had originally been planted.

The rushing form, the striking arm, of the attacking bully, wasted upon thin air. More, the impetus carried Pullett onward so far that his colossal boot tripped on the foot that remained upon the "mark," and he went head-over-heels in the dust, striking his dirty forehead against the rim of the store porch as he fell.

"Durned ef he ain't knocked his ownself down!" roared a man in the suspenseful crowd.

And then there was a laugh that roused the rage of a demon in the breast of the murderous wretch.

As he scrambled to his feet, he hissed hoarsely, and only loud enough for Magic to hear:

"I know ye, ye cussed detective! An' you air never a-goin' fer to git away from here any more!"

He came on a second time, now striking out with both fists, expecting, by his sheer brute strength, to beat down the guard which was immediately interposed to meet his attack.

And to his astonishment, he found that his blows rained on arms that withstood the ordeal like the impregnable front of an iron barricade.

Not a word did the detective utter. He was watching the eyes of his foe, reading there readily every intention, every movement that was formed or to come.

Suddenly, growing tired of acting on the defensive, and perceiving that Pullett was relying solely on his prodigious strength to win the victory, he shot out his right arm with a wonderful skill, planting a telling blow fairly beneath the bearded jaw of the giant and slightly raising him from his feet.

For just one second Pullett gyrated laughably to recover his balance, then went again to the dust, bent around himself until one of the bystanders remarked, dryly:

"Why, look a-there! Ef Jim ain't a-tryin' fer to immytate a bo' constrictor!"

The speaker was the same who had first made the ridiculing remark. Something in the tone attracted Magic. He turned his head for a second to locate the man if he could.

One glance, and he had caught the twinkling eye of the western detective, Slattery. Slattery gave him a wink.

But there was no time for wasting now. Pullett arose with a scramble from the dusty road.

His monstrous mouth opened in a sound that was like the enraged howl of some wounded beast; and then a murmur of astonishment and horror went up from the crowd.

A new and terrible phase was about to come upon the scene of combat there.

In the hand of the giant wretch had suddenly appeared a large knife with shining blade. He poised the weapon aloft, and then,

as if reckless of consequences, in his mad resolution to destroy the man he knew to be a detective, he rushed forward, his bearded face contorted with a maniac writhing.

"None o' that!" shouted a voice—the voice of Slatterly in his miner's disguise.

Simultaneously the western detective made a wonderful spring forward. He grasped the knife half by its hilt and half by the hand that held it, and by a cunning wrench snatched it from the giant.

As he did this, he could not suppress the exclamation, in his natural voice:

"Ha! just the blade I'm looking for!"

Pullett must have been blinded by his insane desire to kill the man known as Nick Numbers. He did not pause even to look to see who it was that interfered, but came on, wild, frenzied, desperate and determined.

Down came the great fist again, aiming as if to split the man in black in twain.

But the thick wrist was adroitly caught in midair and held as if in a vise. And Magic performed that trick which readers have seen him perform before; wrenching round the burly arm of his antagonist in a way that wrought a half smothered cry of pain, forcing Pullett about quickly and helplessly.

Exerting himself to his utmost, for it was necessary with such a foe, he started the giant on a helpless run for a near embankment having a fall of about four feet to the level of another cart road, over which he sent him by a pushing kick in the rear.

This climax seemed to divert the minds of the bystanders from the recent crisis of a murder, and to a man they burst forth in a shout that was half surprise and half admiration for the one who had proved himself a match for the terror of the mines.

Magic felt a pull at his sleeve, while the miners, now unmindful of him, were hastening to the embankment to look after Pullett, and the voice of Slatterly said:

"Come! Let's get out of here for the present! I have the knife—the knife that will match the knife in Kansas that killed Mellville Barnet. The trail is opened! Come!"

Together the two detectives started on a run for the woodland above the store and to the west of the railroad.

As they ran, Slatterly showed Magic the knife he had wrested from the gripe of Pullett.

CHAPTER XXVI.

DETECTIVES WITHOUT DISGUISE.

WHEN Jim Pullett regained the level of the road before the store, nothing was to be seen of his late adversary.

He was still anxious to carry on the fight and made loud boasts of what he could yet do if he had another chance—a species of bravado which even his under-averaged intellect perceived was necessary after the signal defeat he had sustained.

He knew by the looks that were cast upon him by his late followers and admirers, that his popularity had suffered considerably by this occurrence, where a rather slight-statured man had so easily discomfited him in a stand-up fight and then run him clear over an embankment.

"See anythin' o' my knife?" he asked, glancing around him over the spot where the battle had been fought.

"No. An' that war a little crowdin' matters, weren't it, Jim?" remarked one. "You hadn't oughter drawed a knife onto him."

"Oh, shet up! I reckon I know wo't I'm a-doin'. You fellers is blind, that's all. Why, that there man war a detective all the time, an' I was the on'y one wo't knowed it."

"Sho, now!"

"Fer a fact. An' I meant to do fer 'im fer good an' all, if I hadn't 'a' drapped the knife. I don't want ter lose that knife, either, an' don't you fergit it."

And then some one remembered that a miner who appeared to be a stranger among them, had run forward and grasped the knife from Pullett's hand as he was about to smite the disguised detective with it.

"You say at a man hes it?"

"Why, yes, I see'd 'im take it away from yer."

Pullett left the crowd abruptly. A deeply thoughtful look came over his face as he went across the stream toward the mine.

Perhaps he began to think that this strange miner who had taken the knife from him at

a moment when he was so blinded by his rage and murderous intent that he hardly knew what happened, was another detective there to hunt him down for some deed in his dark past.

"Ef it's so," he soliloquized, frowning, "they're a-gittin' too cussed thick round yere fer to suit me. I reckon I'll hev a leetle talk with George, an' then if the colonel ain't a-goin' to hurry up 'is cakes, me an' George'll jest light out anyhow."

With this thought, he started on more briskly toward the mud hut camp, where he knew his brother would likely be at that hour, for the shades of night were coming down fast by the time the fight at the store was over.

Making his way to a fire that burned on that side of the camp where he and his cohorts principally held forth, he stopped suddenly and gazed like a man dumfounded by some utterly unexpected sight.

A female was at the fire, in the midst of the men.

It was the belle, Frank May.

Pullett thought that she was a fast prisoner in the house of Colonel Belvidere.

Frank was moving hither and thither as had been her former wont, and to all appearances as if nothing had ever happened to interfere with her habits among the camps.

He rubbed his eyes and muttered:

"There's somethin' durned crooked 'bout all this 'ere. I wonder ef she's been tellin' the boys about my kidnappin' 'er?"

But with a swagger, he stepped closer into the circle of light from the fire, and took a seat at a pine board, where a rude supper was being spread.

He affected not to notice Frank, though he cast occasional covert glances toward her, to catch at the first slight intimation anything like a defection among those who had been his constant admirers and followers in all rude deeds.

Frank came carelessly to his side. Leaning down, she whispered:

"You see I'm all right again, Jim Pullett. I wouldn't advise you to try that thing on me again, or maybe I'll shoot a little truer next time," and with a meaning nod she passed on.

Jim glared after her but made no reply. He deduced from this that the girl had not yet said anything about the outrage she had suffered at his hands.

For though a bully and backed by many there, he well knew that he would not be a match for all the mines combined, and a combination against him was almost certain if it became known that he had so grossly insulted the popular belle.

George Pullett did not put in an appearance until the coarse meal of the miners was nearly finished. Frank had left the camp and he did not see her.

Jim arose and beckoned him aside.

"Where've you been at?" asked the dwarf. "'Huntin' detectives," was the reply. "Come yere, Georgy, I want ter settle somethin' with you."

And when they had gained a spot away from the fire, Jim said:

"We've got to skip."

"Anythin' new?"

"Wal, yes. 'Stead o' one detective, thar's now two on 'em."

"Is that so?"

"Fer a fact. Look at me face—the's wot he did; an' afore I kem inter camp I hed a fight 'ith 'im, an' durn 'is hide! he fairly wallop me. An', Georgy, I've los' my knife."

"How'd you lose it?"

Pullett related the whole scene that had occurred at the store.

"Thet's bad," commented the dwarf. "I think es you do. The feller wot got the knife mus' be another detective. Gittin' purty thick, ain't they, Jim?"

"My opin-yun. Say, hedn't we better git out? I'm kinder worried 'bout losin' thet knife."

"An' didn't I allus tell you 'at you was a fool fer to cling ter your old idee o' havin' a knife like that, anyhow? Yes, I'm fer git-tin' out, an' I ain't so particular whether we goes with the colonel er not, I ain't."

Jim looked at his brother thoughtfully for a second, and then said, in a slow, thoughtful way:

"I don't see no reason why we couldn't

take ther road es well by ourselves as with the colonel."

"Thet's my idee to a dot."

They silently grasped hands. The action seemed to settle a resolution between them as perfectly as if they had entered into a compact of words.

"When'll it be?" George queried.

"Wait tell I give the word. An' Georgy, we needn't go 'ithout somethin' to pay our way, nuther."

"I'm clean broke."

"So'm I. An' that's the very thing I'm a-tokin' 'bout. I say 'at we needn't go 'ithout somethin', an' I have my eye on that same somethin', don't yer fergit."

"Wal, w'ot's ther racket?"

"Pears ter me 'at the colonel hes too much of that there stuff inter the drawers of his cabbynet—savvy?"

George understood. Again these treacherous rascals shook hands in the gathering darkness.

A further conversation in low-toned accents passed; then they left the camp.

But their course was not toward the house of Colonel Belvidere, whom they evidently meant to rob; they went in the direction of the little cottage that was the home of Frank May!

In the early hour of the night the belle sat at a table in the little front parlor of her humble home. She was thinking deeply as she sat there—her elbows resting on the edge of the table, and her blue eyes gazing steadfastly into the flame of the lamp that burned before her.

Perhaps she was thinking of her murdered husband, Dick Pullett, the one of the trio who had come to the mines and in earnest settled down to an honest working life.

Dick had been a handsome fellow; Frank had conceived an early passion for him, notwithstanding he was believed to be a brother of the other two Pulletts whose characters seemed to be so widely different from his own. She had not accomplished much, so far, toward discovering positively the murderer of Dick; her time of late had been consumed in protecting herself, it seemed, from a cordon of enemies about her who appeared to be bent upon her destruction.

She was waiting too, at that moment, for some communication from the detective, Mark Magic, in whom she felt an extraordinary interest even beyond his being associated with her in the trace of a skull that was to figure prominently in the case he had in hand.

To the brave detective she felt that she owed her life; he had boldly sought the stone house to rescue her from the clutch of Colonel Belvidere; together they had at one critical moment stood—he with his arm around her waist—facing a horrible death.

An odd feeling was creeping into her heart just then; perhaps she did not herself understand it exactly; but Mark Magic was one man in the whole world around whom there centered a sort of magnetism that caused her to murmur, presently:

"I wish he would come. He will come, soon, I am sure."

Even as the words were upon her lips, she caught the sound of approaching footsteps. But the sound also told her that more than one person was coming to the cottage.

She reached into the pocket of her short skirt and her plump hand grasped the butt of her revolver as the thought came to her that Jim Pullett might be about to repeat, in some way, his villainy of the previous night,

"I shall surely kill him," she resolved, as her glance divided itself between the window and the doorway.

The windows were without shutters. Beyond was now the depth of a dark night, and she momentarily expected to see the coarse visage of her giant enemy there.

A rap at the door.

She arose and admitted two men who, at first sight, appeared to be utter strangers.

"Have no fear, Frank," immediately said one. "You knew me by my voice, I guess, for I have always been disguised before when we met."

"You are the detective, Mr. Magic?"

"Yes, and this is the gentleman of whom I told you—Mr. Slatterly, of Kansas."

Both detectives had cast aside all semblance of disguise.

As they came forward into the light of the lamp, Frank gazed earnestly into the face of the Baltimore detective.

He detected her at this, and for one transient second a red blush waved across her sun-browned cheeks.

"Be seated," she said. "I am glad you have come. I have been waiting very anxiously to hear something from you."

Slatterly had heard much praise of the beauty of the belle from his brother detective; he now politely stared at what was to him more like some beautiful vision of a wild western girl transplanted to the humdrum environs of these southern mines.

"We have not much time to spare, Frank," Magic said, standing with his hands on the back of the proffered chair. "We want to catch the eight o'clock train to the next station. Didn't you say your husband had been buried over there?" and he mentioned the name of the station.

"Yes, Dick is buried in the graveyard at the church there, the one near the railroad."

"Can you give us the location of the grave exactly?"

"What are you going to do?" she asked. "You do not mean to disturb Dick's grave, do you?"

"My word for it, Frank, that nothing shall be done to desecrate the grave nor hurt your feelings therein. But I will be candid with you. We want to compare the knife that Slatterly has here—the edge of it, I mean—with the wound in Dick Pullett's head," and at a motion from him, Slatterly showed the knife which he had taken from the giant.

Instantly Frank exclaimed:

"It is the very knife that I saw in Jim Pullett's hand when he was climbing up the face of the mine after you. He carried it first in his mouth, and afterward, when he drew nearer to you, he took it in his hand—to murder you, of course."

Magic nodded significantly to Slatterly.

"I captured the article, miss," said the western detective, "and now we want to see whether it will fit the wound in Dick Pullett's skull."

"You will find that it will do so," she said, after examining the point of the knife for a moment. "The breadth of the wound in Dick's skull would have been broader and partly crushed beyond all doubt, if it had been done with a mattock edge; this singular point of steel—broader at the point than at the other portion of the blade—you will find will fill the opening."

"That is what we supposed. But we wish to make sure before 'closing in' on Jim Pullett."

Frank gave the directions they sought. They left her and were in time to catch the train over to the next station.

Then a strange scene transpired in the old graveyard of the church there.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

"THIS BLADE FITS EXACTLY!"

LIKE the majority of country places, the small village that was at the station where our two detectives alighted was, at that hour, after eight o'clock, nearly wholly asleep.

They found a grocery store open, however, and, guided by its light, were soon in conversation with the proprietor.

"We want two long-handled spades," Magic said. "Have you the articles?"

"Yes, I just have two left." But, countryman-like, he inquired, "what on earth air you two gents a-goin' for to do with long-handled spades, hey?" while he proceeded to bring the spades into view.

"Oh, we're going to start two men out early in the morning to open up a new mine bank, that's all, my friend."

"Eh-hum! Live 'bout yere?" as he untied the handles of the spades and extended one for examination.

"Over at the Relay. We're investing some capital hereabout, and don't want to lose any time. We'll have men at work in the morning, and may strike a bonanza—like some of the rest of the mine-owners 'round here."

"Eh-hum! ain't many of that there kind," remarked the man, with a significant nod. "Mine bankin' ain't what it used to be, I kin tell you, in these parts. Every man what

kin git a mule and cart hes a idee that he kin make a fortin' right away outen the banks. But they soon find out diff'rent, I tell you. How will them suit you, eh?"

"I guess these are about what we want," Magic said, handing one of the spades to Slatterly, and adding, with an assumed manner of gayety: "I begin to feel as if I was a miner myself, with this over my shoulder."

"You wouldn't be hankerin' after that kind o' work long, if you tried it once," asserted the storekeeper.

"Now we want a hatchet. Have you one?"

"Oh, I've got a plenty o' hatchets."

Magic selected a hatchet of good size and good make.

Paying the bill, he was about to depart when Slatterly said:

"Hadn't we better get a rope and tie the spades together again, and take turns carrying the truck?"

"A good idea. Give us a piece of rope, old man."

The storekeeper brought from behind the counter a piece of rope about two feet long, offering it to them for nothing.

"Oh, what's the use doing things half-way," Magic said, returning the piece. "Give us a lot of rope—about six or seven yards—"

"Why, what's the use o' wastin' six or seven yards onto a couple o' spades, gents," the storekeeper half objected at what he considered a piece of foolishness.

"Oh, we don't go any small ways. Give us the rope. So we pay for it, I guess you are not going to worry yourself much."

"Eh-hum!"

The rope was purchased.

The two detectives left the store and proceeded to a spot that was at the rear of the station building where the spades and the rope were shoved under the spile framework of the structure.

The storekeeper came to his door and watched after them until they disappeared in the gloom. Then he shook his head and muttered:

"They cain't fool me es much es they think they air a-doin'. They ain't a-goin' for to start no mine-bank any more'n I am. I'd like to know what shindig them two strangers is up to, an' if it weren't too late, I'd call up Squire Boddle an' hev a talk about it. I don't like the looks of 'em, though they did appear to be dressed mighty genteel."

Magic was captaining the programme which the two had set down for themselves.

"Masks," he said, to Slatterly.

And a moment later they were wearing black masks something very like the highwaymen of romance.

At almost the same moment a voice was heard in song in the direction of the dark aisle amid the trees that led up and away from the bed of the railroad.

A solitary negro, trudging along, was keeping himself company by singing, at the top of his lungs:

"I will hide thee—safely hide thee,
In the shadow of my wings,
All the way from earth to Heaven
I will hide thee with my wings."

The last line of the sacred song had scarcely left his lips, when he was stopped in the center of the road in a way that almost startled him out of his ignorant wits completely.

"Hold on, there, Charcoal!"

Two masked men confronted him, coming forward like phantoms from the deeper shadow of the trees.

"De good Lor'l!" burst from him, as he shrunk back before the masked faces and recalled every story he had ever heard about the Ku-Klux in the disordered southern States.

"We are not going to hurt you, Charcoal, if you behave yourself," Magic said, disguising his voice. "But we want some assistance from you, and you will please consider yourself a prisoner for a short time."

"Yes, sah. An' you isn't a-gwine fo' to hurt dis nigga', sah?"

"No, we don't want to hurt you, and you needn't keep your hand so tight on your pocket there. We don't want your money, either, Charcoal—"

"Yes, sah, but my name isn't Charcoal, sah," looking from one to the other of the in-

tercepting figures and removing his hand from his pocket, where he had no doubt some loose change.

"My name's Suavitor, sahs—Suavitor Simmons—yes, sah."

"Well, Suavitor Simmons, you will just inform us in a big hurry where the old church burying-ground lies from here?"

"Ha-eh-e-eh?" broke from the darky, half-incoherently at mention of the burying-ground.

"The old church burying-ground," repeated Magic.

"Yes, sah—oh, yes."

"You know where it is?"

"Course I does, sah—oh, yes, sah."

"Lead us to it."

"De Lor', good mars'r gen'l'm'n! dis chile doan' wan' fo' to pesser arter no grave-yards dis time o' night, 'deed I doesn't!"

"But we are not consulting your desires at all, old man. Now come, start right off; show us the way."

"Double-quick, or off goes the top of your head," said Slatterly, in a rough tone.

With which remark the western detective returned to the station building opposite and brought the spade and hatchet forward.

These he thrust into the hand of the still hesitating and somewhat frightened darky.

"Go on, now, and no fooling," Slatterly added, drawing a revolver, the mounting of which shone even there in the gloom, and leveling the weapon at the fellow menacingly.

"Yo'—yo' isn't a-gwine fo' to shoot me, is you, sah?" stammered the fellow, becoming frightened more and more.

"You can take your choice," replied Magic. "You will lead us to the burying-ground, or you will have the whole top of your woolly head blown off—"

"E-yes, sah! Oh, yes, I doesn't want fo' to hab dat a-happenin' to me—no, sah! Wot de ole woman say 'bout me wid no top to my head? I's gwine fo' to show you, sah, I is. Don't shoot dis niggal!"

"Gallop along, then—"

"Here—and shoulder these things," added Slatterly, forcing the burden of the spades on him.

Suavitor's eyes were distended widely, but unseen there in the semi-darkness, as he turned and walked rather unsteadily back over the course he had been coming, carrying the spades and striving to imagine what in the world was afoot between these two strange masked figures.

"Dere it am, sah," he said, after a few minutes' of walking, and pointing off toward a tumble-down fence at one side of the road.

"Climb," said Magic, shortly, but in a way that was easily comprehensible.

"Yo'—yo'—yo' wants me fo' to git inside dar?"

"Yes. Go on. Climb."

"De Lor', mars'r gen'l'm'n—" he began to protest; but Slatterly cocked the revolver in a way that struck like a knell upon the superstitious darky's ears, and he hastened to get over the fence without more ado.

Following the directions given them by Frank May, the two detectives were not long in finding the newly-made grave of Dick Pullett.

"Dig," commanded Magic, pointing to the grave and addressing Suavitor Simmons, while he loosened and placed in his hand one of the spades.

The negro's hair was now on end, and a tingle like the shock of mild and continuous electricity was in his veins. He began to tremble like a man with the ague; his white teeth fairly chattered together. He realized that he was in the hands of a gang of resurrectionists.

But there was no escape; the terribly menacing revolver was now placed closer to his ball-like head, and the voice of Slatterly supplemented the command of his partner:

"Dig, and be quick! If you hesitate, off goes your head!"

Suavitor, with an inward prayer to Heaven for forgiveness, struck the spade into the soft ground and began to make rapid progress with the digging, while he cast occasional glances up at the man who persistently held him under cover of the revolver.

"Wonner wot de ole woman say ef she see me now?" he thought.

Suavitor was an apt hand with the spade. Once started with his strange task, and kept

steadily at it by the menace of the weapon in the masked detective's hand, he soon had an excavation several feet below the surface.

Presently he stopped, saying, in a suppressed way:

"I's done struck it, sah. Yarh's de coffin. Kin I git out now, sah, 'fo' de ghos' o' de dead man grab dis nigga by de heel?"

Magic lighted his bull's-eye. Leaning forward he waved the ray across the bottom of the cavity.

"We will not need to take the body from the coffin," he said.

"Why?"

"Because there is a breast piece to it, and by removing that merely, we can turn the head to get at the wound—"

"Isn't yo' a-gwine fo' to let dis nigga out?" broke in the trembling darky.

"Come out," consented Slatterly. "And stand right here alongside of me. If you make the slightest movement to get away, I shall send a bullet into your black carcass on the instant, remember that. Come out."

Suavitor availed himself of the permission with nervous alacrity.

Magic dropped himself into the opened grave, taking with him the hatchet. With this he forced up the breast-piece of the coffin, exposing to view the face of the murdered man.

Tenderly had Frank May placed away the form of her murdered love; the roses that she had laid upon his cold bosom were still there, withered, it is true, by the clammy confine, but telling of a wife's devotion.

But the detectives were on a piece of business that seemed to warrant the disturbing of this last resting-place of the dead, and Magic lost no time in proceeding with what they had set out to accomplish.

He stooped upon the coffin-lid and turned the head aside until he had exposed to view that portion of the head where the singular wound told of the murderer's stroke.

"Give me the knife," he said, to Slatterly.

And when the weapon was handed down to him, he stooped again and applied the point to the skull where the frightful incision was plainly uppermost.

At the end of a half-minute, he arose and said:

"This blade fits exactly!"

"Are you sure?"

"Not the slightest mistake. It is of the exact width, and if Jim Pullett had struck just a little harder, the blade would have probably been buried to the hilt in the brain!"

He bounded out of the grave. Suavitor was again set to work. And the negro worked with a better will at filling up the hole than he had in opening it, now that he saw there was no robbery intended—while his mind, too, was filled with wonderment as to the meaning of this whole mysterious proceeding.

The spades were tossed aside. Suavitor Simmons was dismissed with a five-dollar note in his pocket. The two detectives took up their walk by way of the pike around to the vicinity of the mines where their urgent business lay.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

SHOT DEAD IN THE DARK.

MAGIC had informed Frank May that he would return to her that same night, as it was his desire to close in on his game as speedily as possible if what he went to investigate turned out as he surmised it would.

She remained awake through the hours that passed after his departure, sitting there by the lamp and engaged with a book.

Her face was turned toward the window as she sat.

The old-fashioned, wooden-work clock on the mantle-piece had struck the hour of eleven, when something caused her to raise her eyes in a brief glance at the window—a sort of feeling that suddenly crept into her mind with a strange sensation that some one was near.

And in that one quick, transient look—for she dropped her gaze instantly again to the page of the book—she saw on the outside of the pane a human face.

A face bearded and ugly, surmounted by a great felt hat with a broad brim; and under the brim a pair of hungry, muddy, baleful orbs that stared in at her.

"Ah!" passed in her half-startled brain.

"That face belongs to Jim Pullett. More mischief is afoot. But I shall be better prepared for him now, I think."

As on a former occasion when she heard the approaching footsteps of the detectives, her hand glided into the pocket of her dress and grasped firmly the revolver butt.

Then she carelessly leaned and drew the lamp closer.

There was not the slightest trace of fear in the lovely brown face; the blue eyes perhaps were filled with a new and determined flash, alone betraying that any emotion was at work in her regularly heaving bosom.

Her wary glance from under her long lashes now was upon both the window and the door. And at the latter presently she caught the sound of a stealthy tread.

The door, which she had left unfastened in anticipation of the coming of the detectives, opened cautiously.

Then, as if satisfied that he was established within the dwelling, and further necessity of concealment was past, the burly giant, Jim Pullett, stepped boldly into the doorway of the room in which Frank was.

She looked up with forced composure.

"Well, Jim Pullett, what are you after this time?" she asked.

"Air you alone?"

"Why do you wish to know that?"

"Don't make no difference. Air you alone?"

"You'd better try and find that out by attempting some more of your dastard tricks, sir. What do you want here?"

"I kem fer to see you."

"Well, state your business."

"Ded you go an' tell the boys 'bout my carryin' you off?"

"Oh, you're afraid I did that, eh, and they might be hunting for your hair?" she half laughed.

"Ded you or ded you not, say?"

"Don't you think I ought to tell them, and let them know just what kind of a man you are? How long do you suppose you'd be allowed to stay around here, Jim Pullett, if they knew that you had abducted me and given me into the power of a man who would have killed me if it had not been for another man who was good, shrewd and brave? By the by, Jim Pullett, the man who rescued me is looking for you."

"He is, hey?"

"Oh, he wants to see you real badly."

"An' I suppose that that man es a detective, ain't he?"

"You ought to know."

"Why shed I?"

"Haven't you any reason to think that a detective would be looking for you?"

"No, not as I know. Say," he said, louder, and with some abruptness—"look a-yere, Frank May, I've kem yere fer to make a bargain with you."

"A bargain? What manner of bargain can you want to make with me, I'd like to know?"

"I'm a-goin' away from yere. Afore I go I want you fer to give me that skull 'at I know Dick gave you when he kem yere to live."

"Oh, I haven't any skulls to give away just about now."

"You hev that skull, Frank May!"

"Well, suppose I have?"

"An' I want it."

"Why don't you take it?"

His ugly features reddened with anger.

"Now, see yere, w'ot's the use o' foolin'? I'm boun' fer to hev that ar-tickle; you hes it. Now, where's it at, an' I'll be off an' never do you no more harm, fer a fact. But I'm boun' fer to git it, anyhow, an' you might es well let me hev the cussed thing an' be on my journey—"

"It would be a great pity for you to start out too soon, Jim."

"What d'yer mean?"

"Why, that gentleman—the detective, I mean—wants to see you about the murder of Dick Pullett—"

"Bout w'ot?" demanded he, interrupting her with gruff sharpness.

"Oh, come, Jim, you might as well make up your mind to stay and face the music. The detective has you down pretty fine—to use his own speech—and there's no earthly reason why you should lead him a chase into some other part of the country."

"Gal, do you know w'ot you air sayin'?"

Frank sprung to her feet, as she thought she heard steps on the outside coming rapidly along the path.

She believed that Mark Magic and his brother detective had returned. And confident in the result of their mission, she wanted them to capture the big brute where he then stood.

She was not mistaken in the sound of footsteps; but the comer was not Magic.

As she gained her feet, confronting the ruffian sternly, she cried:

"I am saying this, Jim Pullett. The skull is in the hands of the detective who has been for some time in this part working up the case of murder against you, and this night the knife you have all along carried will be fitted to the wound in Dick's head. Then they will know for a surety who it was that killed Dick Pullett. Dick was my husband. I don't know whether you knew that or not—but he was; and I vowed that his murderer should be brought to justice. Your string is pretty well payed out, sir, and when you are taken into the clutches of the law, so will be Colonel Belvidere and your ugly brother George—"

"Hullo! w'ot's that somebody's a-sayin' 'bout me?" demanded the voice of the dwarf, as that personage appeared in the doorway behind Jim Pullett.

His were the footsteps heard by Frank. The two had gone together to the home of the girl; but Jim went forward first to spy out the situation of matters at the little cottage. When he saw his brother enter the house, George also hurried forward.

Jim had maintained silence during the words of Frank May, but as she concluded, he blurted forth a monstrous oath with:

"My gal, you air too smart fer to live, you air. An' sence you knows so much, I kin tell you besides that I ain't a-goin' fer to be yanked by no detective, an' w'ot's more, you won't be there to see the fun if I am. You hev that skull, Frank May, an' maybe nobody else knows whar you've hid it at. I'll make it a grave fer the thing ferever an' ever, an' then 'twon't make much diff'rence whether me an' Georgy hes it safe er not—"

With the exclamation half completed on his thick and hairy lips, he lumbered forward as if to lay violent hands on her.

Beyond all doubt, there had been murder in the wretch's mind from the first moment of starting toward the cottage.

He wanted Frank May removed from the possibility of witnessing against him in any way, particularly since her escape from Colonel Belvidere. He believed that she had the skull concealed and that probably no one else knew where it was. If she was dead, the skull would remain buried forever.

Her death, then, was the real object of his visit there, not stopping to consider, if he accompanied the assassin's deed by instant flight, that this would surely set upon his track a sleuth who might chase him over the circumference of the earth, if necessary, to avenge the girl.

As he sprung toward her now, his great hands, with clutching fingers, were outstretched, as if to gripe and strangle her where she stood.

But Frank had had an object in drawing the lamp closer to her at the first intimation of the presence of her gigantic foe.

As quick as Pullett himself, she leaned and blew out the light, at the same time stepping aside from her position to the opposite end of the table, so as to be out of range of the background formed by the window, where even the starry-gloomed night would outline her figure.

It was a movement that nonplussed Pullett instantly, for he uttered another oath and called for his brother George.

"Yere, Georgy, hev you ary a match 'bout you? I kin soon end this yere leetle scene if I hev a light fer a minit."

"I ain't got no match."

"All right, then, jest you stay there by the door. I kin find her, I guess—"

"Jim Pullett," warned the determined girl, from the shadow in which she stood, and drawing the revolver from her pocket, "I tell you to go out from here instantly, or as sure as there is a Heaven above, I shall put a bullet into your black heart. I am not afraid of you, and this time my aim may be

a little better than it was when you came here before. Beware!"

"Oh, bah! I ain't afraid o' yer pop-gun, neither!" he retorted. And to George, he added: "Guard the door, Georgy. I'll soon hev this yere thing settled, I will!"

He began groping about with far-reaching arms and hands, expecting either to grasp his intended victim or force her, in her noiseless retreating, into the embrace of his brother.

"Air you a-watchin', Georgy?" he queried, as he went round and round the room.

"Oh, she cain't git apast me," was the malicious response. "I'm ready fer'er."

Then once more came the voice of Frank through the darkness of the room, and from a corner that showed Jim he was wandering far from her vicinity.

"For the last time, Jim Pullett, I say be gone! Beware! I shall count ten, and if you remain after that—"

He made a dash for the spot where he judged her to be, and Frank only escaped him by a wonderful spring to one side.

Then:

"The count is up! Your blood be upon your own head!"

Bang!

The explosion of a revolver filled the room.

A human shriek of agony followed it instantaneously.

Stillness ensued.

"Air you hurted, Georgy?" demanded Jim Pullett, after a few seconds, during which he stood and listened with the realization that the girl had fulfilled her promise to shoot.

There was no response. Then the giant seemed to be frightened—probably for the first time in his life. And to augment this, there suddenly came to his mulish ears the sound of running feet on the narrow path outside.

He could barely discern the door from where he stood. Making a dash for the exit, he ran off in the night.

As he passed the door, he half-stumbled over the form of George Pullett, who lay there motionless.

These last comers were Magic and Slatterly.

They had arrived at a short distance from the cottage, and were a little surprised that no light shone from the window, when both were somewhat startled by hearing the revolver-shot.

They bounded forward and into the house.

Magic's patent fuse was lighted instantly.

The ray revealed Frank May standing against the opposite wall, perfectly cool and with a revolver in the hand that hung at her side.

She pointed to the body of George Pullett.

"I couldn't help it," she said. "I had to do it to save my own life. But I didn't aim at him; I aimed at Jim Pullett, who came here to murder me and was searching for me in the dark room after I had blown the light out."

An examination showed that the accidental shot—or the shot meant for Jim Pullett—had struck George Pullett fairly in the forehead, piercing the brain and causing instant death.

"We have no time to stop here now," Magic said. "Come with us, if you choose, and be a witness to the 'bagging' of Colonel Belvidere. And perhaps Jim Pullett, since he has fled, may be found there with his former captain—Captain Devil-Dash. For Colonel Belvidere is surely that person!"

"What have you accomplished?" asked Frank, as she eagerly accompanied the detectives on their stern mission toward the stone house of Colonel Belvidere.

"We found that the point of Jim Pullett's knife fitted the wound in your dead husband's head exactly!" Magic replied.

CHAPTER XXIX.

THE LAST OF THE PULLETT'S.

JIM PULLETT sped onward through the night as fast as his gigantic frame could be propelled by his long legs.

He headed direct for the stone mansion, crossing Deep Run at a point considerably above the railroad station, and stumbling through the undergrowth that there abounded regardless of the prickly tendrils that

scratched on his face still sore from the welts received in the cart-whip duel.

As he neared the stone structure, however, he slackened his gait and became rather stealthy in his movements.

No lights were visible about the house.

He had learned that the great mastiff, Gip, had been killed; he did not apprehend that there would be any alarm indicating his presence there. And for some reason Jim did not wish his presence known.

He made his way toward the wing of the building in which was situated the library.

"Georgy's a goner," he muttered, in a hoarse whisper, to himself, "an' I'm left all alone—a orphan, now," with a grim humor. "I guesses I kin scrape in the treasure an' light out onto me own hook, an' I don't keer a durn-blast w'ot bekems o' the colonel nur anybody else. Things is too hot round yere—but yere's the winder, ef I ain't mistaken."

He glanced up at the window of the room in which we have seen him waiting, with his brother George, the coming of the colonel after having brought the kidnapped girl there.

Jim was after some of the rich gold and silver ore that he had seen in the drawers of the cabinet.

That this proceeding was a part of a programme laid out between the ruffian brothers was presently apparent. He took from around his waist a coil of rope on one end of which was firmly whipped a stout hook.

This he cast adroitly above, and after three trials succeeded in obtaining a hold for the hook.

Then he climbed up boldly.

Reaching the sill, he paused for an instant as if to see whether there was the least likelihood of any one detecting him at his burglarious proceeding, then he raised the sash, which was without any catch on the inside.

"This yere's es easy es anythink I ever got a holt on," he remarked, under his breath, and noiselessly swinging himself over the sill. "I reckon I'll soon be on the grand skedaddle fur the West, an' oncet more the papers'll be full o' my doin' es they was afore we kem inter this cussed kentry fer to make believe we wos 'onest people."

Inside, he paused again, to listen. Everything was as silent as the tomb itself.

Pullett began to make his way toward the cabinet, the position of which he well knew though he could not see it.

He had taken but a few steps, when he stumbled over a small chest—one of those we have seen the colonel busy with packing—and went headlong to the floor.

"Thar! Durn it! The jig's up, I reckons," he blurted, as his heavy frame struck the floor with a jar that seemed to shake the very floors of the house.

"Yes, Jim, the jig is up!" spoke a voice from the darkness.

Simultaneously a flash of light flooded the room—the ray of a very powerful bull's-eye. And the gleaming thing was turned full upon the prostrate giant, as he was about to scramble up.

"So you concluded to turn traitor, eh?" demanded the voice of Colonel Belvidere, who had, beyond doubt, been aware of Pullett's entrance from the first. "You came here to rob me, eh, and then no doubt make yourself scarce altogether. Have you forgotten the oath that bound together the gang of Captain Devil-Dash? Treason meant death, you know, Jim—"

"Why, cuss-durn it!" ejaculated Pullett, catching an ominous inflection in the speaker's voice. "You wouldn't kill a feller, would you—"

Not another word did Jim Pullett ever afterward utter.

The sharp report of a revolver filled the room and lent its red flash to the ray of the bull's-eye.

Pullett gave vent to a groaning cry and sprung to his feet.

Twice, thrice he spun around blindly and helplessly; then down he went across one of the chests, lying there limp and apparently dead.

The voice of Belvidere spoke again.

"That is the way I serve any one who tries to prove the traitor to me, Cotton. Let that be a warning to you, if you are going to cast your fortunes with mine in the West. Treason means death!"

And the man, Cotton, who, with the col-

onel, had been standing silently in the dark room watching the entrance of Jim Pullett, said, as if rather chillingly impressed with what had happened to the giant:

"Mebbe it's the best way fur to git rid o' a man w'ot don't mean square business—"

"Hark!" interrupted the colonel, as he turned quickly and flashed his bull's-eye along the entry through the door near which they were standing.

Other voices were distinctly heard.

"This way," said one—and it was the voice of Mark Magic. "I think somebody has been shot up here—maybe some more of our Captain Devil-Dash's work. Hurry!"

"Captain Devil-Dash!" burst echoingly but in a gasping whisper from the colonel's lips. "Ha! they have trailed me down."

"Who kin thit be a-comin'?" inquired Cotton.

"Officers of the law!" answered Belvidere, in a hiss, as the footsteps drew rapidly nearer on the stairs.

There was no escape in that direction.

Belvidere dropped the bull's-eye and ran to the window. Cotton imitated him.

The colonel swung himself out and descended. But Cotton was not so fortunate.

The brilliant light of another bull's-eye flashed into the room and Mark Magic cried:

"Halt there! Move another step and I'll down you with a bullet."

Cotton could not see the owner of the voice; but he was sensible enough to know that he must be covered with a deadly tube, so he turned sullenly about, saying:

"Reckon I ain't no special cause fer to run away from anybody."

"We'll see about that. Ah! here is the lamp, fortunately."

Magic found and lighted the lamp that was upon the library table, and by its radiance surveyed the apartment.

Slatterly and Frank May had come in close behind the Baltimore detective.

"Where is Colonel Belvidere?" demanded Magic of Cotton.

"You kin find 'im."

"No fooling, my man! If you are not careful, you'll go up for this thing here," pointing to the motionless form of the giant, "even though I do not believe you did it. Where is Colonel Belvidere? And you'd better be quick with your answer. Slatterly, handcuff the rascal anyhow."

"The colonel's skipped," said Cotton, as Slatterly approached with the iron bracelets, and in hope of escaping this little piece of personal adornment.

But the western detective snapped the circlets on his wrists.

"Which way did he go?"

Cotton pointed to the window.

Instantly upon his doing so, Frank glided away from the door and hastened at a run for the outside of the house.

Magic was about to follow, leaving Slatterly to take charge of Cotton, who was now wanted by him as a witness, when the two were attracted by a deep and labored groan from the giant.

Pullett was not yet dead.

But, judging by the flow of blood that was staining the carpet around the chest, the wretch had not long to live.

"Ah, so you are alive yet, are you?" remarked Magic, as he crossed to the giant and placed him in a more comfortable position on the floor.

"You hev got me, Mister Detective," with difficulty rejoined the dying giant.

"Well, I guess you won't be of much account shortly, now that I have got you. You cannot possibly live," he added, after taking a look at the terrible hole in Jim Pullett's head, from which the white-and-red blood was oozing.

"Am I a goner fer sure?" he asked.

"No mistake about it, old man. You can't live till daylight, if you hold out that long."

"Honor bright?"

"True as you live."

Jim breathed heavily.

"It war the colonel done it," he said, while his eyelids were even then beginning to droop drowsily—droop with the drowsiness of fast-approaching death.

"Did what?"

"Gi' me this yere hole inter me head."

"Oh, I supposed that much. Did that man have anything to do with it?" pointing

to Cotton, who stood silent and sullen to one side, chafing under the tightness of the hand-cuffs.

"No, he ain't got nothink to do with it, he ain't."

And after another effort at breathing, Pullett said:

"See yere. I ain't a-goin' ter die at the man's hands an' leave him fer to run round scot-free o' everything, I ain't. I want fer to tell you somethin' while my breath is a lastin'."

"Go ahead, then, and you'd better be in a hurry about it."

"Do you know who the colonel is, say?"

"I am guessing pretty close, I imagine. He is a man who was known in the State of Kansas as Captain Devil-Dash, wasn't he?"

"You've hit onter it fair an' square. He air the man—an' a daisy o' his kind, I may say—"

"Who killed the man named Mellville Barnet?" here interrupted Slattery.

A strange look came over the bearded countenance.

"Wal," Jim said, slowly, "I reckons you won't be able fer to do much with me now, so I might es well relieve yer minds on that thar subject. Air you a-huntin' fer the man w'ot did the thing?"

"I am."

"Then you air a-lookin' straight at him—straight at one o' em, anyhow. I done the thing, I did, an' the colonel—the captivit, I might es well say—he held the old cuss while I driv' the knife inter his skull. But we didn't make anythink by it though. We couldn't never find the money we tho't the ol' man hed on his place. An' then things got kinder hot an' we levanted fer the East, we did, in a hurry. So you've been a-huntin' fer me, eh? Well, now you hev me, wo't air you a-goin' ter do about it, say?" and the giant seemed tickled even by the fact that death would soon intervene to save him from the clutch of the sleuth who had been in pursuit of him.

"Who killed Dick Pullett?" demanded Magic, at this point.

Pullett was in a wholly communicative humor, now that he realized he could not live. He promptly answered:

"Wal, it weren't me."

"Are you speaking the truth?"

"Gospel every time, you bet. I know who the man war, though."

"Well, who? Speak rapidly."

"Oh, I can't tork very fast; I'm gittin' weak. Say, hev you got any liquor?"

Magic placed a flask to his lips and gave him a deep draught of the fiery stuff.

Pullett said:

"You see, the way of it war this: We want ed a skull w'ot Dick hed been keepin' of since we skinned away from Kansas. Dick bekem too honest fer the crowd he'd been a-runnin' with; we got kinder skeered o' him, fearin' that he might let the thing out some time in one o' his church 'thusiasms. Dick got to goin' to church after meetin' 'ith the gal, Frank May. So we made up fer to git the skull. You see this yere skull hed the point o' my knife a-stickin' inter it, where it had snapped off when I killed old Mellville. But Dick vowed 'at he hadn't the thing. So one night the colonel—Cap Devil-Dash, I mean—he meets Dick, an' me an' Georgy was there, o' course, you know, an' while I was a-tellin' Dick 'at he'd better give us the thing, the Cap he jest lets Dick hev the blade from behind, an' that's the way it war did. Then we drapped 'im down inter the ole shaf' and got shovels an' piled in the yearth. Now you've got it whole an' straight es a cable. I can't tork any more. There's somethin' inter me throat yere," catching his bearded skin in his great hands and making as if to tear away something that suffocated him.

Then, while they gazed down upon the wretch, he suddenly writhed in a terrible paroxysm, turning over and over, finally stiffening out at full length, with his muddy eyes, now glassy and set, gazing vacantly at the ceiling.

"I would have liked to ask him whether the Pulletts were his brothers really, though I hardly think they were," remarked Magic, as he and Slattery drew away from the dead man. "Come, we must catch Captain Devil-Dash. I will send some one here to get the body and also the body of George Pullett over at Frank's house."

CHAPTER XXX.

LAME, WOUNDED AND A FUGITIVE!

WHEN Colonel Belvidere took that half-leap and half-slide down the rope by which Jim Pullett had gained the library, he fully realized that the detective trailers were closing in on him; and the utterance of the name of Captain Devil-Dash showed that his identity in the past was well known.

His sole thought at the moment was to escape, even temporarily, the danger which had thus suddenly come upon him.

Captain Devil-Dash he was, and had ever been expecting to find the officers of the law at his heels; but this was a little closer and more sudden than he had anticipated.

Unfortunately for him, in his haste, the hold he laid upon the hooked rope was not as secure as it might have been had he not been in such a flurry of mind.

For one instant he managed to retain his grasp, and the next he went downward at terrific speed, unable to check himself, though he gripped at the rope until his hands were skinned and bleeding with the velocity of the descent.

On the sward below he alighted, but a cry of pain escaped his compressed lips, for the shock had sprained his ankle.

In a deplorable condition was he now to conduct a flight, with such pursuers behind him as he knew would soon be on his trail.

He ran limply away from the house toward the woodland at the side.

Before he had reached the sheltering depths, he distinguished a pursuer already coming swiftly after him.

"Curse this ankle!" he blasphemed. "If I had but half a show, I could escape them yet. And the worst of it is that I am unarmed, for I dropped my revolver after shooting Jim Pullett and in the surprise occasioned by the voices in the entry of my house. I have nothing but a penknife."

On he went, as fast as he could, and behind came the pursuer who seemed to have sighted him and was pushing forward rapidly and gaining at almost every bound.

Just as he reached the timber, he discovered that this pursuer was a female.

Instantly he comprehended who it might be.

"Frank May, by the shades of Hades!" he exclaimed.

Then, while the words were yet on his lips, Frank called out:

"Surrender there, Captain Devil-Dash! You might as well give it up! I am armed. I do not want to kill you; but if you do not stop I shall certainly shoot!"

"Shoot and be cursed!" he retorted, as he gained the edge of the timber and made a great effort to bound into a lot of bushes there.

Hardly had he uttered the defiance before Frank pulled trigger, and the bullet went humming through the leaves. Then:

Bang! the revolver again.

A sharp cry, accompanied by a curse, broke from him.

This time the leaden messenger had found a mark.

"Stop!" called out the girl once more. "I say I do not want to kill you, but I will if you keep on. You cannot escape me!"

Then she too plunged into the greater darkness of the woods, following close, persistent and unerring on the trail of the disabled man, who made considerable noise in his flight because of his wounded and paining ankle.

And though the girl did not know it, the bullet that had found its mark was wringing a very fountain of curses from the man's lips, as the warm blood trickled from the furrow made in his side.

"A million curses on the girl!" he foamed, struggling along through the undergrowth. "If I had but the use of my limbs or a weapon with which to meet her equally, I would kill her in her tracks! But she is a wild-cat let loose—I have learned that."

On, on, the hunted man!

Swift, steadily, determined in his rear the trailing girl, who, it seemed, was not to be thrown off even there in the almost impenetrable depths of the timber.

Once he paused and crouched behind a fallen tree, hoping that she would pass him in the darkness.

But she came straight for the hiding-place!

Again he started onward.

Then, as a feeling of rage at what he was pleased at last to consider his cowardice prevailed in his brain, he stopped short, resolved to meet and give battle to the girl.

"I shall kill her! I shall kill her!" he mumbled with a chattering nervousness.

But Frank, perceiving the maneuver, raised her revolver, crying shrilly:

"Surrender! You cannot escape me! I shall fire again if you do not at once consent to go back to the house!"

"Curse you forever! No—no! I will not surrender to a girl!"

And he turned and plunged on again, just as the revolver cracked, and another cry burst from him as a second furrow was made by the bullet on his hip almost directly above the first wound.

"I shall bleed to death," thought the startled villain, as he felt his strength failing a little with the loss of blood. "I must find some retreat where I can attend to these wounds. O-h, Frank May, if I ever can get the chance, look out for yourself, for the torture of the stake and fire will be as a mercy to what I will inflict upon you," and he shook his fist back at the form of the girl, who had been momentarily thrown off the correct trail by the interposition of some heavily clumping trees.

Belvidere started with a desperate effort to keep up the flight, after that momentary pause. He did not take more than half a dozen steps, however, when suddenly he found himself precipitated downward into a great hole.

The timber-land to the north of the railroad in that vicinity has been tried time and again by prospectors for ore, in the hope of striking some rich mine. But strangely, the richness which seems to abound to an almost unlimited extent to the south of the track abruptly ends, as if by a line of demarcation drawn by Nature's hand, at the brink of Deep Run.

The "trial shafts" sunk by these prospectors can be found in various places.

Into one of these ditches—for they are scarcely more than that—created by the anxious but at last disappointed delvers, Belvidere had fallen. The fall rendered him unconscious.

And Frank May suddenly found that her fugitive had disappeared in a very mysterious manner. She searched, she listened for some sound to guide her as heretofore in her persistent pursuit of the man she was determined to capture or kill.

For Mark Magic had said to her while on their way to the stone house:

"I shall capture this Captain Devil-Dash *dead or alive*, Frank, because my friend Slattery has just such a warrant for him duly executed, with the knowledge that he is beyond doubt the Captain Devil-Dash of Kansas, who is wanted there."

Noiseless herself now as some gliding snake, she stepped to a log and seated herself, with the thought:

"He cannot have escaped me. He is somewhere near. I shall wait for daylight. And then, Captain Devil-Dash, if you do not surrender, I shall avenge the death of my Dick by killing you, one of the members—ay, the leader—of the Pullett gang!"

In the early morning, ere the sun had fully showed itself above the horizon, a crowd of not less than fifty miners were congregated around the front of the store at the station.

In vain had blown the bugle-call from the hills; in vain had the "bosses" been around endeavoring to bring the men in to work.

A great excitement was prevailing.

Neither of the Pulletts had been seen since the meal-hour at night at the mud-hut camp; and when it drew near time for the miners to go to Colonel Belvidere's mine, search was instituted for one or the other of the brothers.

By merest chance the cottage of Frank May had been visited, and there was found the dead body of George Pullett.

That was enough.

This made the second corpse that had been found in the vicinity of the mines within a few weeks.

The news spread like wildfire; the store was sought by eager gangs of workmen, as if there could be found some explanation of this second mystery.

The predominating element there was not

now that which had been controlled by the Pulletts either; those who murmured loudest were the better portion of the miners, including even the negro gangs who came from more distant banks.

Who had killed George Pullett?

"I'll tell you that, my friends," said a loud voice among them, when the murmur had taken the shape of a question, and Mark Magic forced his way through them to a box that stood on the edge of the porch.

Closely following him was the Western detective, with the handcuffed man, Cotton, still in fast durance.

Magic mounted the box, while the crowd pressed forward closer at the announcement that they were about to receive an explanation of the mystery.

"Will you listen to me without interrupting? Will you allow me to explain to you a piece of villainy that has been going on in your midst, while you thought that none among you were otherwise than honest people? I have but little time, my friends, but I can say a great deal in that time if you will permit."

"Go on! Go on!" yelled several.

"I am a detective. I came here to find the murderer of Dick Pullett, because I felt that the murderer was here. I have been among you in various disguises, in the performance of my duty as an officer of the law. I have found the murderer of Dick Pullett, but he is now dead. Who killed him? I will tell you. The assassin was Jim Pullett and a man whom you all know in this community as Colonel Belvidere. Do not interrupt, I say," as a murmur began to emit from the staring faces and widened mouths. "Ask this man," pointing to Cotton, "if his employer was not the man who was known to you as Colonel Belvidere, and whether he did not hear Jim Pullett, when he was dying, state that he and Colonel Belvidere killed Dick Pullett in cold blood because they wanted to secure a skull—a human skull—which Dick was known to possess. That skull was a silent but terrible witness against the Pulletts and the colonel, for a crime they committed jointly in the State of Kansas where they were known as the Captain Devil-Dash gang; and your Colonel Belvidere was no other than Captain Devil-Dash. That man abducted your belle of the mines and had her a prisoner in his house, where he would have killed her if she had refused to give up to him the skull; for she was Dick Pullett's wife—you hear that?—she was Dick Pullett's wife, and he had given her the skull to keep, saying to her that he feared harm to himself from the other Pulletts. Frank May escaped from the house of this Captain Devil-Dash—or Colonel Belvidere, whichever you choose—and was at her home last night, when Jim and George Pullett, making one more effort to secure the skull which would have been witness enough to hang them, had attempted to kill her. She it was who shot George Pullett in defense of her own life. If she was here now—"

"Hooray fer the belle!" shouted a man from the edge of the crowd, waving his hat on high, and Magic recognized him as the one who had played the "whole-hog" ticket on the policy.

A cheer went up from the audience.

"If she was here," Magic pursued, "she would tell you herself how it happened better than I could. After we arrived at her house, this gentleman and myself," pointing to Slatterly, "we all went to the house of your Colonel Belvidere to arrest him. We got there just in time to see that he had shot Jim Pullett, thus adding another to his already numerous crimes, of which this gentleman has a record from Kansas newspapers. We captured this man, his employee," pointing now to Cotton, "and are holding him as a witness to the last deed. Captain Devil-Dash is now at large, and I am authorized to offer to you, one and all, a reward of one thousand dollars for his capture. He cannot have gotten out of the neighborhood yet, and I ask that every man who is a good and honest citizen will exert himself to win that reward and at the same time serve the ends of justice. Start out in squads in every direction, and I will attend to the stations between here and Washington, so that he cannot possibly board a train without being apprehended. Will you aid in the hunt for

this man?—this murderer, this outrager of women, this wretch who has insulted and uttered a deadly threat against the pure girl who is endeared to you as Frank May, the belle of the mines? Answer!"

And they did answer in a way that showed the detective's speech had had a wonderful effect. To a man, they now no longer looked upon the presence of the sleuth with prejudice; they wanted to find the man who had assumed so many airs among them while all the time he was a red-handed murderer. The "whole-hog" man was the first to step forward in answer to the appeal, and he said:

"Carve out yer line o' perceedin', mister detective, an' count me the fu'st captin' o' the reggymen't!"

CHAPTER XXXI.

CLOSING SCENES.

It did not require long to arrange the mode of the man-hunt about to be inaugurated. Squads of six and eight were formed, with appointed leaders, and these were started in various directions, to scour the country both to the north and the south of the railroad, while Magic went to the station and sent various telegrams to the other stations along the route between Baltimore and Washington, which would put every agent on the lookout for the party they were after.

Slatterly had said:

"I want two good, reliable, strong men to hold onto this man," indicating his prisoner, Cotton, "until I shall have use for him. At least for a few hours. I will pay for the service, if it is required."

Two stalwart miners promptly stepped forward, and they laid hold of Cotton, one of them remarking:

"Reckon I kin hold a couple o' sech es he is, Mister Detective—"

"Oh, you needn't be so all-fired partick'ler 'bout me," broke in the bull-dog voice of Cotton. "I ain't got no cause fer to run away, I ain't; an' besides, ain't I es well off es a hitched hoss with these yere things onto me?" and he displayed his manacled wrists to the grinning pair who took charge of him.

Slatterly and Magic, with three miners, constituted a squad themselves, and at Magic's suggestion they pursued a course across the stream.

"He might take a notion to come over to his mine and seek a hiding-place," the detective suggested. "At any rate, we have a grand army after him, and he must be as sleek as a fox if he escapes now."

"Something seems to tell me that we will catch him," Slatterly rejoined. "And I want the man pretty badly. There's a handsome reward waiting for me if I can get him into Kansas."

"I hardly think you will be able to accomplish that," said Magic, thoughtfully.

"Why not?"

"If a man like the Captain Devil-Dash of our trail gets in a tight corner, the chances are that he will find a means to cheat the hangman."

"Well, I hope not, for I want him."

"I hope we'll get him. I am assisting you, now; my trail ended, it seems, with the death of Jim Pullett—"

"I don't see how! Did not the Pulletts and this man, Devil-Dash, together kill your man, Dick Pullett?"

"True—but what is that?" suddenly exclaimed the Baltimore detective, pointing off toward the high face of an old mine at about a hundred yards back from the road.

The whole party stopped and gazed.

At first there appeared to be two mere animated specks on the gravelly face of the high embankment. But as they watched thitherward, they saw something like a waving handkerchief or skirt that was evidently meant to attract their attention.

"Follow me," ordered Magic, turning aside and stepping out briskly for the mine where the signal waved.

That which had attracted the attention of the squad headed by the two detectives, was a thrilling tableau.

High on the face of the mine, in a cavity that had occurred by a natural fall of the earth after the mine had been deserted, was a man.

He was bloody, haggard and desperate to look upon.

And this man was Colonel Belvidere.

The villain was wild with the pain of his sprained ankle and frenzied with the prospect of bleeding to death from the wounds inflicted upon him by the revolver of Frank May. He had succeeded to some extent, with the aid of daylight, in stanching the wounds, but there was a bloody trail leading up to the spot upon which he seemed to have resolved to stand at bay, because there was but one ascent to it and that so narrow that no more than one at a time could approach him.

In his eyes there was a maddened light. The fugitive was not really sane at the moment. He was desperate, bleeding, and moreover, above him was sounding the voice of the girl who had tracked him by his own blood, when the light of the sun gave her an opportunity to read the signs on the leaves and sward, to the eyrie that he had thought would give him a temporary respite from the danger surrounding him.

Frank had attained a position above his shelf-like retreat.

Her voice was coming down to him now, saying:

"Captain Devil-Dash, I could shoot you from where I am standing if I chose. But why should I do so? Surrender, I say, and meet your fate like a man."

"Shoot! Shoot! you cursed wild-cat. I suppose you take a delight in turning the tables on me, now. But if I could get you in my hands for a minute, I'd show you what I would do. Why don't you shoot then? Aha! you nor those fellows yonder"—meaning the approaching group to whom Frank had signaled—"cannot get me out of this perch unless you shoot me like a dog. Then it is yourselves who will be murderers—not I. Ha, ha, ha!"

He laughed in a curdling way.

When Magic and his squad had arrived within a few yards of the face of the embankment, they saw the whole situation.

Belvidere on his shelf; above Belvidere the persistent girl who had trailed him until he had stopped, at bay.

"Here he is!" cried Frank, to those below.

And the voice of Belvidere immediately followed, mockingly:

"Yes, here I am! Ha, ha! what are you lunk-heads going to do about it? Do you think that you can come up here and take me? Suppose you try it—"

"I can shoot him from where I am standing," broke in the voice of Frank from her position above the fugitive. "But I don't want to do that if he will surrender."

"I shall never surrender to you, you cursed detectives!" shouted Belvidere, with sharp emphasis.

A consultation was held between the two detectives.

"I should hate to lose him now," said Slatterly, "after coming all the way from Kansas after him. But I leave it to you. Do whatever you think best. And you know my warrant reads: 'dead or alive!'

Magic stepped forward and hallooed to the man up in the face of the precipitous wall:

"Captain Devil-Dash, you are known, and your career is run. There is a detective from Kansas here after you. He has a warrant that tells him to take you dead or alive. Which will you choose? Shall you come down here and take your gruel like a man, or shall we bore you with bullets where you are? Be quick with your answer, for I've spent about enough time around these mine-banks working up this Dick Pullett case. Come, speak out; a quick surrender or—death," and Magic drew his revolver, cocking it, though he really meant the movement more as a menace.

He did not at the moment mean to shoot the cowering wretch.

"You'll shoot me!" roared back Belvidere, who was now more frenzied than ever in the loss of blood and the pain from his terribly sprained ankle.

Perhaps, indeed, he had utterly lost the balance of his reason, for he added, in a screaming way:

"Shoot, then! Shoot while I am falling! Here's your chance! Shoot! He, ha! Shoot—shoot—shoot!"

And to the horror of all who witnessed it, the man suddenly took a leap into air that carried him free from the face of the embankment, and in the next instant a human

form was hurtling downward at frightful velocity to the floor of the mine.

A crash—a sickening thud that told of broken bones and mutilated flesh—and they knew that the suicide had accomplished his crazy purpose.

Captain Devil-Dash was no more.

When they went to pick him up, several of the squad who had accompanied the detectives turned aside in shuddering horror.

With the death of Colonel Belvidere the trail after the murderous gang that had come to the Ann Arundel mines seemed to have ended.

At the last moment the arch-villain had beaten the law out of his person.

The bodies of the Pulletts and the wealthy (?) Colonel Belvidere were a subject of a nine days' wonder in the adjoining counties of Ann Arundel and Howard, and the speech of the detective was a matter of canvas for many months.

But shortly after having attended to the body of the suicide, Mark Magic was seated in the cottage of the belle of the mine, and his conversation was very earnest, as the reader can judge.

"I have made the first failure of my life, Frank."

"In what way, Mr. Magic?"

"If you could see my record at the marshal's office in Baltimore, you would learn that I never yet started out to secure a villain that I did not bring him in. In this case I have been outwitted. The insurance company, however, has offered to pay me handsomely. I feel a little sorry for the storekeeper here, because he will not get anything now—"

"Oh, yes he will," she said, quickly. "I mean to pay it."

"You mean the bill there?"

"Of course. Look. I told you once that I had a secret. Well, I did not like to talk much about it so soon after Dick was killed, but—look at that," and she brought to him a paper.

Unfolding and scanning the legal-looking document, Magic saw that it was a policy for ten thousand dollars on the life of Samuel Wheelright.

"Who is Samuel Wheelright?" he asked.

"Samuel Wheelright was my husband," she said. "He is—or was—Dick Pullett; and the company was fully advised of all the circumstances, although my husband was known as Dick Pullett. That is the secret I had—his name, I mean."

"Frank," said the detective, in a tender voice, "I know that you mourn your husband very much."

"Yes, I do."

"You are very much alone in this world, are you not?"

"Oh, that doesn't make any difference. I guess I can make my way along. I'm not afraid of the world—"

"But, Frank—" and he stepped to her side and took her plump brown hand in his, adding: "Don't you think that you could ever love again?"

"That is something that remains to be seen," she answered, in a way that the detective took to be an encouragement, for he deliberately stooped over and kissed her.

"I will wait," he said, "until you shall say that you will be my wife. For I love you, Frank, and there is no use in making any long speeches about it—"

"And I have admired you, Mr. Magic—Mark," she returned, keeping his hand in her own.

A look seemed to seal a compact between them. Our detective was in the toils of Cupid!

Slatterly returned to Kansas. The particulars of the death of Captain Devil-Dash were soon known to the authorities where Mellville Barnet had been killed, and though the reward was not paid in full, a handsome purse was made up for the detective who on a mere theory, had been so successful in running to earth the murderer.

Magic returned to Baltimore, and he took with him the mysterious skull that had seemed to be a part and parcel of the trail made by Devil-Dash and his gang of so-called Pulletts.

The rattling substance inside the skull was what he had surmised it to be; the point of the singular knife, which, loosened by the

operation of time, had fallen inside from its place of confinement in the incision of the wound.

In the late September, Mark Magic went to his chief and said:

"I am about to start business for myself—a private agency."

"Going to leave us, Magic? I hope not."

"Yes, sir. I have a good partner, one whom I can rely upon. In short, sir, I am about to be married—that is, about Christmas time."

"Oh-o, you are going to be married."

"Yes, and I shall be happy to see you present."

For Magic and the belle of the mines had set the day, and the sound of wedding-bells was in prospect for Christmas-tide.

Cotton was found by deputies from Annapolis in search of the escaped convict and promptly returned to his term of imprisonment.

Of the girl, Etta, nothing was ever afterward heard, and whatever may have been her discovery from the papers she obtained from the cabinet, it is not known.

THE END.

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